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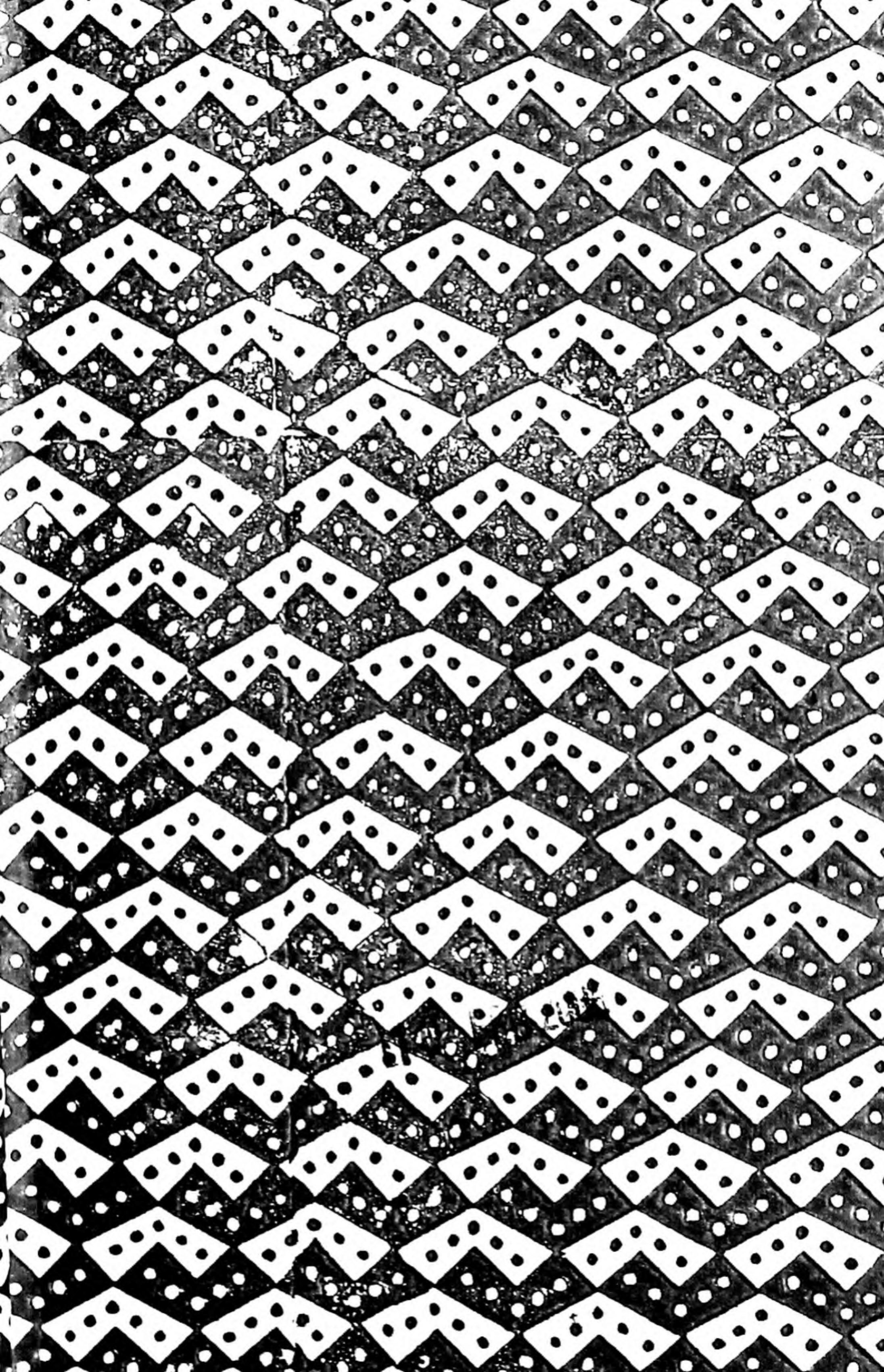
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NO GREATER LOVE

by

BARONESS ORCZY

"Greater love hath no man
than this, that a man lay
down his life for his friends."

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I KNOW that many readers will doubt the truth of this extraordinary story. There are a great number of sceptical minds in the world of to-day, both young and old. All that I can say to them is that to the best of my belief every event which I have here set down is absolutely true. The whole story was told me by a young Russian who had himself witnessed those events. In some of these he had played a not unimportant part: others were put on record by an old man who lived all through them and was one of the chief actors in the pathetic drama. He was a man of unimpeachable integrity, the Staroshka (something rather more important than a mayor in a Russian community) of the village where it all happened. I only wish some of my readers who are of a sceptical turn of mind could have heard the story as it was told to me. Every word the young man spoke bore the impress of truth; and, seeing his want of education and his wits, which were none too keen, he could not possibly have invented the whole thing and given the multiplicity of detail which could only have been gathered together from positive knowledge.

I must leave it at that.

Monte Carlo,
May 31st, 1938.

EMMUSKA ORCZY.

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BOOK I
LEONOW—RUSSIA, 1918



With that precious burden he trudged through the rain and mist.

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A ROLL of drums.

A harsh word of command.

An ear-rending detonation, followed by something like a whisper; the faint sound of escaping breath; a stifled groan; a sigh . . .

And nothing more.

Silence.

Silence, broken only by the wind soughing through the narrow streets of the city and the creaking of a door on its loose hinges, up above the winding stone stairs. Outside, Nature sighed and murmured; but here there was not a sound.

After a minute or two Nikolai Ivanovitch Leonow gave another word of command. The firing party shouldered arms. Turned. Marched in single file up the winding stairs; the sound of their heavy footsteps reverberated against the stone walls of the dank, murky cellar, on the floor of which seven human bodies lay prone.

Seven human bodies. Motionless. Silent. A man, a boy, five women. He who was once the mightiest man in Europe, Tsar of all the Russias, at whose frown kings and statesmen trembled, was lying here now on the muddied floor of an underground cellar, stark and stiff, more impotent, more defenceless than the most abject *moujik* in the land. He and his family. His beautiful wife, four young daughters, the cherished sickly boy, once heir of all the ages.

Was ever murder more foul perpetrated under the guise of political expediency? "It is better so," the

Congress of the R.S.F.R. Soviet of workers, soldiers and peasants had unanimously decreed. Better, it said, for the future of Russia and for the welfare of the workers, and to Nikolai Leonow of the 56th Rifle Division was entrusted the task of carrying this monstrous decision through. It must be done thoroughly and completely. No hesitation. No going back. Above all, no emotion and no pity. And Nikolai Leonow was the man to do it.

So the Congress decided. There was no man like Nikolai Ivanovitch Leonow for such a task. A fine soldier. Hard as nails. He had held the rank of corporal of artillery during the Great War. Had seen the worst of the terrible *débâcle* of the once proud Tsarist army. Had taken an active part in the military revolution of 1917. Been promoted to officer's rank that same year under the Government of workers and peasants established by the Pan-Russian Congress of the delegates of workers, soldiers and peasants. In the years before the War, he and his wife had been in domestic service in the house of titled capitalists, by name Rabrinski, and Nikolai was afterwards reputed to have become a rabid anti-Tsarist and opponent of the old *régime*. He was subsequently appointed to the command of the special guard detailed to convey the tyrant and his family first to the town of Tobolsk in Siberia, and in the following April to Yekaterinburg in the Urals. Here they were placed, always under the same special guard commanded by Nikolai Leonow, in the house of a local civil engineer named Epatiev, who had placed it at the disposal of the Government for that particular purpose; and Leonow had done his duty throughout both loyally and sternly as befits a soldier, and he could be trusted now to see to it that the will of the people of Russia—the only people that counted: the soldiers, the workers and the peasants—was carried out swiftly, without sentiment and without mercy.

And it was. For there lay the seven bodies—one man, one boy, five women, stark and stiff on the unpaved floor of a dank cellar in the empty house of Epatiev,

civil engineer. They had been taken to Siberia and back again to Yekaterinburg, the frontier town in the Urals. But what was to be done with them now? What were their partisans planning to do? What plots were being hatched? What intrigues set on foot? Plots and intrigues would go on being hatched while a single member of that Satanic family was alive. Hindrances to the development of this new Russia and to the ultimate welfare of the proletariat would constantly arise, hydra-headed, if they lived. Then why should they live? The dead alone can neither plot nor intrigue, nor stand in the way of the betterment of a great nation.

"It is better so," the Congress decided, and Nikolai Leonow, already in command of the special guard, was also put in command of the executioners. He was a fine soldier, had proved it over and over again during that awful War set on foot by tyrants and capitalists for their own selfish ends. He was a man who never left a task half accomplished, hard as nails, a fine patriot, and loyal to the core. And he could be trusted to make all arrangements for quickness and for secrecy. And Nikolai Leonow proved himself equal to the task. The tried and loyal men who had formed the firing party were confined to barracks after their hellish work was done, and Leonow had given all the necessary instructions for the disposal of the seven bodies during the course of the ensuing night. Until one hour after midnight these were to be left undisturbed. The cellar door was locked and double-locked, and Leonow himself took charge of the key. Thus everything was arranged for the best. No unnecessary fuss. Nothing left to chance or premature indiscretion. A locked door and the cloak of night over everything, over the hideous cowardly crime, and over this house inhabited now only by the dead.

LEONOW—RUSSIA, 1918

CHAPTER II

BUT Nikolai Leonow, like the conscientious soldier that he was, desired seemingly to satisfy himself that all his orders had been properly carried out and that silence—the silence of death—did reign unchallenged in engineer Epatiev's underground cellar. Yes! That was his object, no doubt, when, at a late evening hour, when the shades of night were beginning to invade the narrow streets of the city, he made his way once more to the house of Epatiev.

There were not many people about. A thin drizzle coming from a leaden sky blurred every outline and wrapped the few passers-by in a mantle of mist, making them look like ghosts. Leonow trod warily along, his tall form, clad in belted coat, loose trousers, and high boots, bent under a load which he was carrying over his shoulder. The tower clock of the old church of St. Alexei boomed out the tenth hour when he came to the angle of a substantially built stone house. Here, down a narrow unlit alley off the main street, a few steps led to a door below the ground level. Leonow put his burden down beside him on the steps. He then took a key out of the pocket of his trousers, unlocked the door, and hoisted his burden once more over his shoulder.

Immediately facing the door a winding stone staircase led into what looked like outer darkness. Leonow closed the door behind him. He dived once more in his pocket and drew out an electric torch, with which he guided his steps down the winding stairs. Progress was arduous, for the stairs were narrow and the load cumbersome. But, as could be surmised from the deliberate way in which Leonow proceeded in this strange self-imposed duty, he had come here, alone, at this hour of

the night, in order to make quite sure that everything was as it should be.

As a matter of fact—and it was this, no doubt, that had worried him—there had occurred a slight incident this morning at the very moment when he had given the order to fire. He had been standing immediately by the side of the soldier at the end of the line, whose rifle was aimed at the ex-Tsar himself. Something had suddenly jerked that man's elbow. Oh, not noticeably, for the man had fired at once along with the others and the ex-Tsar had, after a slight sway, fallen over backwards. His shirt was stained, and thereafter he had lain prone and stark like the rest of his family. Still, there had been this scarce perceptible incident. No wonder that a conscientious soldier like Nikolai Leonow wanted to make sure. Promotion lay one way if things were right: death without mercy if they were wrong.

He had now reached the bottom of the stairs. The floor of that underground cellar, fitfully lit by the electric torch, lay spread out before him like a picture straight out of hell. For the space of a few seconds he closed his eyes in order to shut that picture out. The women! That young boy! The 'Little Father'—once Tsar of all the Russias!... But he had not come here to sentimentalise. Was he not the hardened soldier who had been specially selected to do the will of the people? He laid his burden on the floor. It was the body of a man, slightly built, in the prime of life, bearded, and dressed in shirt, trousers and boots. A large dark stain showed on the shirt. Leonow straightened out his massive figure. He passed the back of his hand across his streaming forehead, then paused, rigid yet alert, straining his ears to perceive the slightest sound. But none came from the floors above. The house was empty, and there was nobody about. Only an army of rats scuttled away in the darkness, reappeared for a few seconds, with beady eyes fixed on the enemy, man, and scuttled away again. Leonow flashed his torch around, forcing himself to look steadily, one by one, on those

seven bodies lying there, stark and stiff, with rigid hands distorted by the final convulsive agony. He stood quite still, straining his ears, listening for the one sound which he had come to hear. Was it a sigh? A movement? Or what? . . . And suddenly they came, both the sigh and the movement; then a murmur, scarcely more than a breath: "Oh, my God, have mercy!" And Leonow fell on his knees close beside the body whence those sounds had come. Instinctively his hand went up to his forehead, to his breast, to his right and left shoulder, making the old, almost forgotten sign, now forbidden to soldiers—the sign of the Cross.

He murmured: "Oh, my God! I thank Thee for Thy great mercy. The Little Father lives!"

Again he listened, but there was no other sound. Once more he flashed his electric torch on the other bodies—the women and the boy. Tears gathered in his eyes as he gazed on them. He brushed them off with the back of his hand and turned quickly away. No sigh had come from those set lips: no movement from the rigid limbs. There had only been the one incident this morning, the jerking of only one man's elbow, and it was only the Little Father, the one-time great and mighty Tsar of all the Russias, whom God had allowed to survive the odious massacre.

Leonow strode across the floor. He flashed the torch about, searching for something which he found after a minute or two. It was a bullet. He picked it up and thrust it into his pocket. He now laid the torch on the ground and knelt down beside the Emperor. Gently and with infinite precaution he passed his arms under the prone body and lifted it, then moved it to one side. In its place he laid the unknown dead. Who that was I cannot say. No one ever did know save Nikolai Leonow himself, nor was the substitution guessed at or even suspected till many years later.

Leonow took off his coat and wrapped it round the unconscious form of the Tsar, which he then hoisted over his shoulder. He was a strong fellow was Nikolai

Leonow; the thin, emaciated body of the Emperor was featherweight to him. He then picked up the torch, murmured a final prayer for the dead, and softly, silently, went on his way.

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LEONOW—RUSSIA, 1918

CHAPTER III

It was still raining when Leonow came out in the open, a thin, penetrating rain backed by low temperature and mist. The main street into which he turned presently was almost deserted, save by a few lean and hungry dogs scouring the gutters for food. Alone, in the more substantially built stone houses, did a light glimmer through one or two of the windows. From an *isba* lower down the street there came the only sounds of human life: snatches of music; a doleful Russian ballad sung to the accompaniment of a *balalaïka*, or the syncopated lilt of a dance tune, coupled with the tramping of feet on a wooden floor, the clapping of hands and shrill cries of encouragement to the performers. To the right, the Iset moaned and gurgled in her shallow bed.

Leonow turned away from the main street and down into a narrow alley, which led by tortuous ways to the river bank. Here he paused a moment to readjust his precious burden. He transferred it from his shoulder to his arms and rested the head against his breast. A feeble moan came in response. It was pitiable to hear, but in a way it put heart into the old soldier. The Little Father was suffering, but, thank God! he was alive.

Mist and drizzle made visibility almost nil. The ground was sodden with thick, slimy mud, and in the

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alleyway streams of turbid water ran down the incline in cascades.

Leonow, with that precious burden in his arms, proceeded warily, his heavy footsteps squelching through the mud. It was gradually getting darker too. But of all these difficulties and discomforts he was never conscious. He knew what he was doing and knew what dangers beset him, and that by striving to save the life of his Emperor he had taken his own in his hands. Life to him meant less than nothing. Many a time had he faced certain death, courted it, even, in defence of his country. He had served under the Little Father before he was thrust into the new army with officer's rank. Here he had feigned loyalty to a mass of traitors and revolutionaries with a view to serving his Emperor again secretly or openly as occasion arose.

He had seen the downfall of the country he loved, the desecration of the church in which he had worshipped, and sacrilegious hands laid on his Emperor who, to him, was the representative of God upon earth. How could life mean anything to him after what he had seen to-day? All he could do, all the prayers that he could utter, were prayers of thankfulness to the Almighty that he, Nikolai Leonow, and no other had been chosen to command the firing party this morning. Without this almost miraculous good fortune there would have been no jerking of one man's elbow, and the Little Father would even now be lying dead by the side of his beautiful wife, of his daughters, and his beloved son.

No. Life meant nothing more now to the old soldier of the Tsar. The only life in all the world that did matter was that of the Little Father, God's own anointed, and the Almighty Himself had willed it that he, Nikolai Leonow, should be the means of saving that precious life. So he trudged through the rain and the mist round narrow alleyways, then out into the open, into that great solitude on the threshold of the forest, where great boulders and rugged crags look as if in the dim past they had come tumbling down to the river brink from the

towering Urals above, into that arid vastness on the edge of which a few primitive habitations alone proclaimed the presence of man. Here silence had its kingdom at this hour, unchallenged save by the murmur of the mountain stream and the occasional call of a night-bird or of a wild beast on the prowl.

Leonow tramped on. Like a feline on the war-path he sniffed the air, alert to every danger, and straining his ears, listening to the possible approach of an enemy be he a belated worker or reveller, or to the sound of footsteps, of creaking wheels, or the distant snatch of song—sounds any one of which might be the precursor of death.

But no sound came. Not yet.

It was very dark now, but Leonow was child of the soil and could have found his way about blindfolded. He had reached the river-bank at the point where a couple of planks had been thrown across the water by way of a footbridge, with a supporting handrail in imminent danger of collapse. There was a stone bridge farther down stream, but a tram-line ran along it and had its final stopping-place the farther side of the river. There were always people about both at the halt and up and down the bridge, and Leonow therefore preferred to trust to the more lonely way. He peered out into the darkness. Less than a mile ahead between the river and the forest behind a spinney of silver birch thick with undergrowth nestled his cottage home. One more effort and all would be well, for in that cottage was safety for the Little Father Tsar. Two women were there who would minister to him, Leonow's wife and daughter, and there would be his own primitive surgical skill which he had acquired at the rough school of field dressing-stations during that terrible campaign in Galicia.

LEONOW—RUSSIA, 1918

CHAPTER IV

HUGGING his burden close to his breast, Leonow stepped on the bridge. Suspicious of the ramshackle handrail he did not hold on to it, trusting to his own sureness of tread. He was more than half-way across when danger suddenly loomed ahead, the danger which he had anticipated, the forewarning which he had dreaded. Through the darkness and the mist there came first the muffled sound of mutterings and curses, then the vague gleam of an electric torch and the outline of a man who was crossing the bridge in the direction opposite to him. Leonow came to a halt. Flight was out of the question. Burdened as he was, his progress would necessarily be slower than that of the enemy, if indeed that shadowy form veiled in mist did turn out to be an enemy and chose to give chase. There was nothing for it then but to stand one's ground on these planks where there was just enough room for two to pass. Nor was there time for deliberation. The next moment Leonow was brought face to face with a man he knew, one Igor Yanowski, who held a minor post in the provincial administration.

"God help us, Nikolai Leonow!" the man exclaimed, coming to a dead halt and flashing an electric torch in Leonow's face. "What in hell are you doing here at this time of night?"

"I am going home," Leonow replied glibly, "and I am in a hurry. My wife is waiting up for me."

"You soldiers are lucky devils," the other grunted. "You are always getting half-days off. We unfortunate workers of the State are kept with our noses to the grindstone."

Then, as Leonow made no remark on this, but tried to

push past him, Yanowski became suddenly aware of the burden which the other carried in his arms.

"Why, my friend," he exclaimed, "and what on earth have you got there?"

He was standing squarely, with legs apart, right across the bridge. He had obviously been drinking, for he swayed slightly backwards and forwards, and clung with one hand to the precarious handrail, whilst with the other he waved and flashed the electric torch about. Leonow tried in vain to get past him.

"Eh?" Yanowski reiterated obstinately. "What have you got there, my friend?" He did not let go of the rail, but as he swayed he nearly fell across the unconscious body of the Tsar, and his face, with his breath reeking of vodka, almost came in contact with Nikolai Leonow's.

"What in hell—" he reiterated for the third time.

As the man wouldn't move, Leonow made up his mind to answer.

"One of my men," he said, "met with an accident during rifle practice. I am taking him to his mother's cottage over there. Will you let me pass, Igor Yanowski?"

But this curt explanation had the effect of rousing in Yanowski the ferreting instinct of the State official. He tried to pull himself together, drew himself up and queried in his most inquisitorial manner:

"And why did you not take a soldier of the Soviet army to the State hospital, Nikolai Leonow?" And as the other made no reply to this and actually tried to push past him, he went on more imperiously still: "Who gave you leave to bring a soldier of the Soviet army out here? Where are your orders? You must have had written orders for this? Where are they? Let me see them."

He flashed the torch in Leonow's face and on the inert body which he carried. He would have liked to peer at it underneath the coat that covered it, but he hadn't a free hand; his right held the torch which he could not very well spare, and obviously he could not

let go of the handrail, which though precarious was his only support.

"Look here," he continued, doing his best to steady both his voice and his legs, "I don't like the look of all this, Nikolai Leonow, and you are coming back to the city with me now, and you will go before the Administrator, who has probably gone to bed, but who will certainly get up again for so urgent an affair. And you will explain to him——"

"I will not go back to the city with you, Igor Yanowski," Leonow retorted bluntly. "And you are going to let me pass now, for I am in a hurry. You are drunk, and you don't know what you are talking about. I will stand no interference from you, *or*——" He paused and put into that last word all the significance which he intended to convey. The little word "*or*" was nothing less than a threat and should have warned Yanowski of the danger which he was courting. But the official mind was either unaware or disdainful of danger and "*the worker for the State*" at once resumed in his most dictatorial manner:

"You are doing yourself no good, Nikolai Leonow, by this defiance. If you don't come along with me to the Administrator to-night you will find a posse of police at your door to-morrow morning. You do not imagine—do you?—that I am going to keep silence over this extraordinary incident and over your more than suspicious behaviour. I will report to the Administrator as soon as I get back to the city. And so——"

"But you are not going back to the city, Igor Yanowski," Leonow growled between his teeth like an enraged beast, "and you are not going to report anything to the Administrator. This you can take from me, and may God have mercy on your soul."

He held the unconscious Emperor close to his breast with one arm, and suddenly, with the other, he gave the handrail a mighty shake, and at the same time threw the weight of his massive knee against it. It had been ramshackle before; now it gave way with a crash. Igor

Yanowski gave a loud cry as he felt the rotten wood break away under his hand. He tried to regain his foothold on the narrow planks, but he lost his balance, and with another despairing cry he fell headlong into the stream. His head must have struck upon the rocky bed of the river for no further cry came from him.

Leonow, his grim deed accomplished, drew a deep sigh. "It had to be," he murmured to himself. "It was his life—his futile, useless life, against that of the Little Father Tsar. It is better so."

"It is better so!" This had been the decision of the Soviet of workers, soldiers and peasants when they ordered the massacre of the Tsar and all his family. Well, here was a small measure of retribution. The man now lying haply dead in the stream below had probably been one of the miscreants who had voted for the committal of that abominable sacrilege. Nikolai Leonow felt no compunction, no qualms of conscience for what he had done. "God will forgive me," he said to himself. "He knows that it is for the best."

TATIANA, the wife of Nikolai Leonow, was in bed and asleep when she was roused by the sound of someone moving outside her cottage door. She jumped out of bed and ran to the window.

"Who is there?" she called. Her husband's voice answered her.

"Bring a light, Natasha," he commanded.

She came, carrying a candle, out of the bedroom into the living-room. Her husband was there. He had a

man in his arms. He had left the cottage door open behind him, and ordered his wife now to close it.

"And tell Vera to get up and to re-make her bed," he added.

The woman obeyed without comment. After she had called her daughter she turned back into the living-room. Nikolai was carefully lowering the unconscious body of a man down on the wooden bench which was fixed against the wall. Tatiana helped him to dispose it along the bench. She ran back to her bedroom, brought a pillow and placed it under the man's head. With skilful hands she helped Nikolai to remove the stranger's shirt, laying bare the wounded shoulder which the bullet had traversed. She brought water and clean linen, and washed and dressed the wound under her husband's directions. Not one question did she ask, not even a mute one with her eyes. After a time her daughter Vera joined them. A young girl, wide-eyed, silent, anxious to help. With a glance she indicated that her room and bed were ready. She asked no questions either. The expression on her fair, childlike face betrayed neither inquisitiveness nor fear. She had already witnessed so many tragedies, such palpitating dramas in her young life, that the sight of a wounded man brought to the cottage at dead of night by her father did not scare her. She tried to be as useful as she could, bringing fresh clean water when needed, and helping with the bandaging. When the wounded man groaned, which he often did under the kindly but somewhat rough ministrations, Vera's soft cool hand soothed his feverish brow. She it was who took off his boots, and she helped father and mother to lift him from the bench and to carry him into her own room, where, with infinite precaution, he was laid on her bed with his head upon her pillow, and her coverlet drawn over his knees.

He seemed comfortable now, lying there with closed eyes, quite still. Only his lips appeared to be moving under his beard, as if they were murmuring a prayer. Father and mother stood for a moment beside the bed,

with hands folded and eyes closed. They, too, were praying. Vera stood by, gazing at the wounded man, in a kind of ecstatic absorption.

"I would like to watch," she murmured after a time.
"May I?"

Father nodded. "But you must call me at once," he added, "if he moves."

Vera promised that she would.

"Or if you get too sleepy," her mother added.

At which Vera only smiled. She knew that she was not likely to get sleepy. She was too excited to sleep.

Mother put the candle down, and father fetched the big armchair out of the living-room and placed it for her near the foot of the bed. Mother kissed her, and then tiptoed with father out of the room.

Later on, at break of day, father and mother came back to see that the wounded man was still comfortable, and that Vera now got a few hours' sleep in her mother's bed. They came in almost soundlessly. The room was in half-light with the window open and the rosy glow of dawn creeping softly in. The wounded man lay quite still, with eyes closed; his breath came and went evenly. Vera was kneeling beside his bed. Her cheek was pressed against his hand.

"Come, Vera," her mother said in a whisper, "you must get some rest now."

The girl turned appealing eyes on her.

"Please, mayn't I stay a little longer?" she pleaded.

Tatiana turned to her husband for approval, but he shook his head.

"You must do as your mother tells you," he said; and as Vera made no attempt to rise he took hold of her arm and gently tried to pull her up. The wounded man's hand closed tightly over the girl's. He stirred and opened his eyes.

"My God!" he murmured; and after a moment or two: "My God, have mercy on us all!"

The others dared not move, only Nikolai's eyes

turned instinctively to his wife first and then to his daughter, wondering how much they guessed.

Tatiana, after a few moments' complete stillness, had folded her hands in prayer. Vera was still on her knees; her lips were pressed on the sick man's hand.

Nikolas II, the once high and mighty Tsar of all the Russias, was lying wounded and helpless in the cottage of a humble soldier. His glance, which had been wont to set the crowned heads of Europe quivering with apprehension, wandered round the simple, poorly furnished room and came to rest on Leonow's expressive face.

"Where am I?" he asked.

Leonow came down on his knees.

"In the house of the meanest of your subjects, Your Majesty," he said.

The Tsar shook his head.

"I am not 'Majesty,'" he murmured. "I have not been 'Majesty' for a long time now."

"To your subjects always 'Majesty'—God's own anointed," was Leonow's solemn reply.

"But how came I to be here? And where——?"

The flood of memory came surging back. "Oh, my God, have mercy!" His eyes, dark with agonised questionings, searched once more the face of his rescuer; but Leonow's head was down on his breast. He and his wife and Vera were all on their knees, hiding their faces from him. The silence, the sunken heads, the scarce audible murmured prayers revealed to the unfortunate man the full extent of the appalling truth. Complete consciousness returned for a moment with all its hideous memories.

"Oh, my God! why was I allowed to live?" he groaned, and mercifully fell once more into unconsciousness.

It had to come, this dreaded moment when the fallen monarch would come to realise the immensity of the tragedy that had deprived him of wife and children and

of everything except life. There was, of course, the danger that such an overwhelming cataclysm would, in his feeble state of bodily health, react upon his mind. It was only through the most tender care and devotion, through untiring efforts and the healing powers of nature, that this precious life, unimpaired by mental derangement, could be preserved for the ultimate salvation of Russia and her people.

Up to this hour Nikolai Leonow had only thought of saving that precious life itself. But the time had come when definite plans for the future would have to be made. And this with as little delay as possible. He, Leonow, was under no delusion as to his own ultimate fate. The death of Igor Yanowski might never be brought home to him, but if for no other reason than the fact that he had been absent from duty without leave the previous night, he would be hauled up before the Administrator of Police of the district, tried for dereliction of duty by what was still termed "court martial," and shot. Well! that was as it should be. He had anticipated it and did not care one iota what happened now. The Little Father lived, which was all that mattered. Tatiana and Vera knew everything there was to know, and they were quite capable of carrying out what plan he would devise for the ultimate safety of the Tsar.

While his wife busied herself with household matters, brewed some tea for the sick man and prepared warm water and fresh linen for dressing the wound, whilst Vera remained on her knees with great eyes fixed on the wan face of the Emperor, Leonow stole quietly out of the cottage. He went the same way that he had followed the evening before, over the barren, open ground, the crags and the boulders, and over the primitive bridge, the scene of his crime. Here he paused a moment and looked down into the gurgling waters below. Igor's body was lying there on its back, wedged between the stones of the river-bed, and with the turbulent waters of the stream washing over his face. Leonow gazed upon his victim, feeling no vestige of remorse. What he had

done he had done, and God would certainly forgive him, for it had been Igor Yanowski's life against that of His anointed.

Leonow turned away without as much as a sigh of compunction, and walked briskly through the tortuous alleyways to the town. It was early morning still. The sun had risen in an immensity of crimson and gold. A soft westerly wind came from over the mountains, and the air was both fresh and warm.

In the cottage Tatiana had roused Vera from the trance-like absorption with which she regarded the stricken man. He stirred, and the girl, rousing herself from her dream, helped her mother to minister to him. Together the two women washed and dressed his wound, and induced him to swallow the tea which they had prepared for him. He thanked them both with a look which was almost humble, and brought tears to the women's eyes. From time to time Tatiana would stand still and listen, and glance towards the window. She didn't know whither her husband had gone and when he would be back. Whatever he did would be right, she knew that, and was content to wait until everything was made clear to her.

The old clock in the living-room had struck eight when the sound of cart-wheels drew her to the door. There was a cart, sure enough. Two rather lean, but otherwise vigorous-looking, horses were harnessed to it, and over the back there was a hood of tarpaulin which obviously had been hastily improvised. Leonow jumped down from the driving-seat. He followed his wife into the cottage.

"It is Andor Danilow's cart," he said in answer to her mute questioning. "He has been wanting to sell it for some time, as he was getting too old for this carrier business, so I bought it and the horses. They don't look up to much, but they are strong. I would have been back sooner, only it took some time to fix up the hood."

He broke off abruptly and asked: "How is His Majesty?"

"Suffering a good deal," she replied, "but he is wonderfully brave."

"Does he say anything?"

"No. But of course he knows. His mind seems quite clear."

"Thank God for that!"

He took off his fur hat and sank down in a chair by the table. He was both weary and anxious. Tatiana put a bowl of tea and a hunk of bread before him. He ate and drank eagerly, but all the while she could see that he kept one ear on the slightest sound that came from the next room. After a time he said:

"Now, listen, Natasha. You and Vera are going to drive His Majesty by easy stages to Varnakieff. It is a long, long journey but you can easily do it, and you can drive slowly all the way because there is no danger of pursuit—not at first, anyhow. Except you and me and Vera there is not another living soul who knows that the Little Father Tsar lives. All the same, you must avoid *isbas*, for people who go there are always curious, and when they drink they talk. You can trust the village folk and rest in their cottages when it is necessary for His Majesty's comfort. They, too, may be curious, but they are loyal and would never betray you by idle talk."

He paused a moment before he went on in the same earnest, matter-of-fact way:

"The road is quite good between here and Palosan; you know it, of course."

Tatiana nodded.

"About fifty versts from there, midway, in fact, between Palosan and Kronine, you will come to the mountain pass on your right which will lead you through the forest and past several villages to Varnakieff. Any woodman at work in the forest or anyone in a village will always direct you if you should be in any doubt about your way. At Varnakieff, as you know, lives that saintly man Alexei Fedorovitch Patchenko. He will have the honour of

sheltering the Little Father Tsar in his house, and with your arrival there, your responsibility will cease. You will have to tell Alexei Fedorovitch of the sacrilegious crime that has been committed on the person of our beloved Little Mother and the Imperial children. Tell him that they were all shot in the house of Grigor Epatiev, the engineer, of Yekaterinburg, but that by a miracle and the will of God the Little Father has survived that appalling massacre. Patchenko will know what to do and how to communicate with the loyal subjects of His Majesty, of whom there are—thank God!—still a great many who would sooner die than betray him."

Leonow, although he was as a rule a man of few words, had spoken thus lengthily and solemnly. His eyes were fixed on his wife's face so as to make sure that she understood all that he said. He had formed this plan in his mind for the safety of the Tsar, and he was confident that if she understood his instructions she would carry them through whatever happened. And he was satisfied that she did understand, and that she and Vera were resourceful enough and plucky enough to complete the great work which had its inception in his mind twenty-four hours ago, when he jerked a soldier's elbow at the moment when he gave the order to fire. He drew a great sigh of satisfaction, and placing his hand on his wife's shoulder, he said fervently:

"God will guide and protect you, Natasha. It is His will that you and Vera should do as I have commanded."

Tatiana said nothing for a moment or two. Then she murmured anxiously, scanning his face:

"But you, Niki? What are you going to do?"

"I will stay here, Natasha," he replied simply, "and await the further will of God."

The tears which she had bravely tried to suppress now welled to her eyes. She threw herself on her husband's breast and sobbed out her heart in an agony of grief.

"Must you, Niki? Must you . . . ?" she murmured. He pushed her away from him very gently, saying:

"I must, Natasha. You know I must." She could only continue to murmur through her tears: "Come with us to Patchenko's house. . . . You would be safe there."

He shook his head gravely, put his finger under her chin and raised her face, compelling her to meet his eyes.

"If I did that, Natasha, what would happen? The police are after me, you know. I was away without leave last night. They will come here, and if they find me gone they will follow on my track. That would mean pursuit, and no escape for any of us anyhow. You understand that, don't you, my dear?"

"I cannot bear it, Niki! . . . I cannot bear it! . . ."

"Oh, yes, you can. You are a soldier's wife; and a soldier's life belongs to his country and to his Emperor. Apart from that," he went on brightly, "if it is the will of God that the authorities look leniently on my dereliction of duty, I will, as soon as I get my freedom, go and join you at Patchenko's house."

He folded his wife in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

"In the meanwhile, all you have to think of is the precious life that is entrusted to our care. How many times in the happy olden days did we sing our hymn 'Our life for the Tsar!'? Well, we have the chance of proving that when we sang that in church we were not hypocrites."

"And now," he resumed briskly, after a slight pause, "go and fetch a mattress, a couple of pillows and two or three rugs. We'll arrange all this on the floor of the cart under the hood. Then you and I will lift His Majesty out of bed and lay him down on the mattress, with his head resting comfortably on the pillows."

Everything was now ready as Leonow had directed. The mighty monarch lay under the cover of sheepskin rugs on the floor of a carrier's rickety market cart. The improvised hood of tarpaulin flapped over his head with a gentle, monotonous sound. Tatiana sat on the driving-board, holding reins and whip. Vera sat beside her with

her back to the horses; her elbows rested on her knees, her chin in her hands. Her eyes were fixed on the sleeping Tsar.

Leonow stood by the cottage door. He gave the order to start. Tatiana gave the reins a shake and the horses made a move; the wheels creaked, the ramshackle cart bearing the once mighty Tsar of all the Russias was on its way.

Tatiana did not look back. She had lain on her husband's breast, and it was only in her heart that she had uttered the last supreme farewell. She never spoke after that, and she swallowed her tears. She, at any rate, had been no hypocrite when in church or at home at evening prayer she had joined in the singing of the national hymn: "Our life for the Tsar!" God had so ordained that it should be her beloved husband's life and not hers that was to be sacrificed for the country they both loved and for the Emperor who was God's own anointed.

She held the reins loosely, and the cart moved slowly over the rough road which led under the shadow of the towering Urals from this outlying corner of Siberia through Palosan to Varnakieff. Her daughter, sitting silent beside her, remained wrapped in that same ecstatic absorption with which from the first she had regarded the man whom from childhood she had been taught to venerate as God's own representative upon earth.

Leonow remained standing at his cottage door until the cart had disappeared round a bend of the road. Before turning in he knelt down on the threshold of the humble house which had sheltered his Emperor. He made the sign of the Cross and spoke a prayer of thanksgiving to God for His great mercy in allowing him to do what he had done. After that he rose, went into the cottage and there made everything tidy and clean. He looked round at the place and the familiar objects which he had hoped would in future mean home to him once all the turmoil of past wars and revolutions had become

nothing but a hideous memory. He had been happy, very happy in years gone by, in the service of people who were always kind and considerate to their dependants. But this cottage was going to be his home for the rest of his life. Here he would come and rest after he obtained his final discharge from the army, when once the country which he loved had become sane and peaceful once more. He had brought over from Ufelgrad the bits of furniture which he cherished, gifts all of them from his employers. There was the bed whereon he had slept all these years by the side of his fond and faithful wife: the armchair, drawn close to the fire: the wooden cradle in which Vera had slept when she was a baby.

It would have been such a happy home if only God had willed him to have it. Now all hope of that was over—the home life, Natasha's welcoming kisses and her tearful farewell.

He gave it all a last loving look. The police would not be late in coming, and he was quite ready for them.

The Tsar was alive and safe, and the worker's work was done.

It has always been a moot point whether the authorities—either civil or military—ever had the faintest inkling of the drama that had been enacted in the house of Epatiev, the civil engineer, and of which Nikolai Ivanovitch Leonow had been the hero. If they did suspect or guess at something—though one doesn't quite see how they could—they certainly kept the secret of it to themselves. Indeed, subsequent events went far

to prove that neither the Chief Administrator of the district nor the military commandant knew anything about the substitution of a dead man for one that had escaped death through the devotion of an old and loyal soldier. How could they know? Seven persons had been shot, and seven bodies been disposed of; obviously there was no reason to expend another thought on that family of tyrants of whom the Soviet of workers, soldiers and peasants had said emphatically that they were better dead.

On the other hand, there was just an element of mystery hanging over this sixteenth day of July, which was known as the "Day of Justice." There was, for instance, the death of the Administrator's assistant secretary, Igor Yanowski, who was found the next morning in the river below the footbridge, dead with a broken skull. True that the handrail of the bridge was broken and that presumably Yanowski had clung to it, had lost his footing, and when the rail broke under his hand had been hurled on to the stone bed of the river below. It seemed simple enough and yet it wasn't and for this reason: the incident of the Administrator's secretary coincided with the absence of Captain Leonow from duty that night. Now Captain Leonow was an impeccable soldier who had earned officer's rank through his well-known devotion to duty. He had been selected to command the firing party entirely because of that. It certainly was strange, not to say mysterious, that he should have transgressed so flagrantly the very night that followed the execution of the tyrants.

Be that as it may, Nikolai Leonow was certainly guilty of dereliction of duty. He had been absent from barracks all night, and had not reported in the morning. A small detachment of mounted police was sent to his cottage to apprehend him.

Leonow was arrested and brought before the Administrator of Police and interrogated. It had turned out in the meanwhile that the first thing the

corporal in charge of the detachment sent to apprehend Leonow had remarked was that the latter's wife and daughter were absent from the cottage. The Administrator therefore began his examination of the prisoner by asking him where his womenfolk were at the moment.

"They have gone to visit a relative, comrade," was the reply.

"I didn't know you had a relative," the Administrator retorted curtly.

"Yes, comrade. My wife's sister."

"What is her name?"

"Maria Alexandrowna Loubline."

"Where does she live?"

"At Volazan, comrade."

"Where is that?"

"Twenty versts this side of Perm," Leonow replied glibly. He had had time to think all this out. Volazan? There was no such village, but he had invented the name, and the road to Perm lay in the opposite direction to the one along which Tatiana and Vera were travelling with their precious burden. All this deception would, of course, come to light presently. Leonow had only thought it all out in order to gain time.

The Administrator gazed on the prisoner with stern, scowling eyes.

"It's a long way to Perm and a rough road," he remarked gruffly, "for two women to negotiate on foot."

"They are driving, comrade."

"Driving, are they?" the Administrator countered with a sneer. "I didn't know, Nikolai Leonow, that you kept a carriage."

"I purchased a cart from Andor Danilow. My wife and daughter have gone in that."

"Purchased a cart, did you?" the Administrator queried with biting sarcasm. "And how many horses, pray?"

"Two. You must remember, comrade, that Andor Danilow was trying to sell his old carrier's cart and his two nags for what they would fetch."

"Yes, I know that, Nikolai Leonow. What I didn't know," he added with a harsh laugh, "was that you were rich enough to buy them."

"I am not rich, comrade. But as you say, the road is long and rough. My wife is getting old. Twenty versts would be too long a tramp for her."

"Then why did she go?"

"Her sister is very ill. My wife wished to see her before she died."

His story was not believed. All the same, another detachment of police was sent on the road to Perm with orders to apprehend the two women and bring them back immediately, cart, horses and all before the Chief Administrator of Police. The detachment rode off. They reckoned that on their powerful horses they would come up with the slow-moving cart before they had covered half a dozen versts (one verst is about two-thirds of a mile). But nothing of the sort happened. The mounted men rode all the way to Perm without coming across any cart driven by two women, and, what's more, without coming across any village named Volazan, or any person in any village by name Maria Alexandrowna Loubline.

Clearly, then, the prisoner was lying. And since he lied he was obviously a traitor, and the devil alone knew what treasonable plot he and his womenfolk had hatched, or were hatching, against the Government, even to the length of being associated with others in planning a counter-revolution. The only way to deal with traitors of that sort was to hang or shoot the lot. They, like all tyrants, were far better dead.

And here ends the story of this loyal and brave soldier who gave his life not so much for another man who happened to be his Emperor, but for an ideal. His God, his religion, both made manifest in the person of the Little Father Tsar, the head of his Church, God's own anointed. And he paid the price of his devotion without a murmur. No amount of brutality or third-

degree methods wrung from him one single word that might have compromised the success of his enterprise. Death finally sealed his lips and he took the secret of his noble deed with him to the grave.

LEONOW—RUSSIA, 1918

CHAPTER VII

NIKOLAI LEONOW being thus disposed of to the satisfaction of the Chief Administrator and his like, the police detachment was once more sent on its way, this time on the road to Palosan. There still are only two roads over the mountains which can be negotiated by a cart and horses: one leads to Perm and the other in the opposite direction to Palosan. The police detachment under the command of a sergeant now followed the latter.

Close on thirty-six hours had in the meanwhile been lost. But what are thirty-six hours' start when the pursuers are well mounted, and the pursued are trundling along the rough road in a ramshackle cart behind a pair of half-starved nags? Twilight lingered long even in the narrow valley, and when night fell the moon would be up and flood the landscape with its light. Strangely enough there was no information to be obtained on the way. Neither in the cottages, nor in wayside *isbas*, nor on enquiries from the woodmen working in the forest, were any tidings to be had of a cart and horses driven by two women. Neither at Okatiev nor at Walk, nor again at Palosan had such a cart been seen. Bribes were of no avail, nor were threats; the peasants, the charcoal burners, the woodmen, had seen nothing of the sort. They shook their heads and looked blank and unintelligent when they were questioned. No, no, they

were quite sure that no such vehicle as the comrade sergeant described had been seen in the village or in the forest. But then, they were all busy with their work and hadn't noticed. Carts went up and down the road all day, they didn't look up every time one passed by.

The sergeant cursed and swore, and the pursuit went on. It was only a question of time, for there was no other road on which the cart and horses could possibly be driven either with or without safety. The detachment of police pushed on at a faster pace. The moon now was up, but it was not yet night. The evening air was sweet as milk and fresh as new-mown hay; a slight breeze stirred the crests of the forest trees, and murmured through the spinneys of silver birch and larch. There was the scent of pinewood and the tang of burning charcoal in the air.

On ahead the cart lumbered. Several halts had been made in isolated cottages on the way, for the wounded man was in pain and had need of rest. He also had to be ministered to as efficiently as could be done with the primitive dressings which Tatiana had brought along with her. It was Vera's privilege to do this, and she did it with a sense of infinite happiness. The Little Father was very patient, and the grateful looks which he bestowed upon her sent her into a veritable heaven of felicity. She had put behind her all question of fear or of danger: her whole soul was wrapped up in this man, the great and mighty Tsar, who was dependent on her for his every comfort and the soothing of his pain. She felt it within herself that she would gladly die if her death could bring him happiness and freedom from all care.

Tatiana, on the other hand, whose devotion was just as great, though less emotional than her daughter's, was all the time alert to the danger which must, she knew, be hard on her heels by now. She had no fear of betrayal on the part of the peasants in the villages or the workers in the forest. It was all very well for those brutes up

in Moscow to talk of the "Soviet of workers and peasants"; their abominable teachings had no hold on the village folk round about here. Bolshevism was still either a dead letter or an abomination to them. The sight of the police would rouse in them every instinct of opposition to this new *régime* which they hated, and if questions were asked of them, bribes offered, or threats formulated, they would entrench themselves behind a barrier of vacancy of mind that no amount of probing on the part of a comrade sergeant could ever penetrate. No. Tatiana was not afraid of betrayal, but she was afraid of pursuit.

She did not, of course, know exactly what had happened at home. That her husband would pay the price of his devotion with his dear life was a foregone conclusion. Tatiana accepted this with the philosophy peculiar to the Russian peasant, and with the simple faith and trust in God which no amount of misfortune and injustice had the power to shake. Niki would, of course, be arrested on the charge of being absent from duty and failing to report. Equally, of course, he would be shot, probably without trial, and she knew enough of Bolshevik methods to realise that having disposed of the husband, the authorities would turn their attention to the wife. What she did not know and could only guess at was the precise hour when the police would be sent on her track, nor how long a start she had over her pursuers.

She had driven through Palosan according to plan. It is the first township of any size on the Yekaterinburg-Kronine road and once past it there is on the right, as Leonow had indicated to his wife, the beginning of the rough track which leads over mountain passes to the village of Varnakieff where lived Alexei Patchenko, the saintly man in whose tender care Tatiana had been enjoined by her husband to remit the precious person of the Tsar. She had now been three days and two nights on the way and on this third night had negotiated some twenty versts of the stony mountain road. The wounded

man had greatly suffered from the jolting and from fatigue; it was imperative that he should spend the rest of the night on a bed.

The road here is lonely enough; it winds its way along the narrow valley of the Rutza at the base of pine-clad slopes, with the turbulent waters of the mountain stream murmuring and gurgling some fifty feet down below, and the heights of Ismel and Taganai stretching their snow-capped heads up to the stars, in the distance far away. Past the tiny village of Striark the valley widens for the length of a couple of versts or so, and here the forest trees which cover the slope form a dark and rich background to clusters of cottages which are for the most part inhabited by woodmen. Tatiana drove past these straggling habitations till these became more and more isolated one from the other. Outside one of them, more lonely than most, she pulled up. Vera jumped down, and though it was past midnight she went boldly hammering at the door. Within a few minutes a dim light appeared at one of the tiny windows. The window was opened, a tousled head was thrust out, and a man's voice enquired what the noise was about.

"Weary and hungry travellers," the girl gave reply, "and one is wounded and in pain."

The tousled head drew back from the window, the light moved away, and a minute or two later the cottage door was opened and a gruff voice said simply: "Enter!"

The same whole-hearted hospitality that had been extended to Tatiana and her charge all along the journey was again offered them in this lonely cottage. The woodman's wife, his daughter and his two sons, lads in their teens, all helped to lift the sick man out of the cart. The family's best bed was hastily tidied for him, and here he was laid, and ministered to under the supervision of Vera, with as much care and skill as these kindly people were able to muster. There was not much in the house to eat, but what there was was at the disposal of the "weary and hungry travellers": a bit of maize bread, a

drink of hot tea; there was even a handful of corn for each of the horses and another of rough hay.

There was one more bed available on which Tatiana was made to stretch out her cramped limbs by the side of the woodman's wife. The rest of the family spent the night, as they had probably often done before, on benches or on the floor. Hospitality is almost a religion with these poor people, who often, whilst hungry themselves, will be ready to share their last crust with those in trouble or in need. Vera, curled up in a blanket on the floor at the foot of the bed whereon rested the Tsar, hardly closed her eyes all night. She listened to his breathing, was aware of his slightest movement, and fixed her mind on God's great mercy which had entrusted His anointed to her care. She was the first to hear the sound of footsteps approaching the cottage in the early dawn. They were running footsteps that bounded chamois-like over the stones of the road, and presently came to a halt outside the door. By this time everyone in the cottage was awake. The woodman went to the door, the two lads jumped up and hovered, eager and curious, behind their father. It was young Voluski who had come at this early hour. He was panting, having run all the way from his home a couple of versts away.

"What do you want?" the woodman asked him, frowning, for obviously something very untoward had happened to bring the boy here in this state of breathlessness.

"The police!" the boy gasped.

"Come inside and sit down," the older man commanded.

The boy did as he was bid. He was given a drink of water. He was in such a state that he could hardly speak.

"Now tell us about it. Where are the police?"

"A long way yet," the boy explained. "Ivan Tcherski came running to tell us. He had been told by Dmitri Smirnoff, who had it from Leon Adamovitch who saw the police in Palosan. There are six of them

and a sergeant, and they were making enquiries about a hooded cart with two women in it. "Are they here?"

"What's that got to do with you?" the woodman retorted gruffly.

"Because if they are not," the boy replied simply, and nodded to the two lads who stood close by gaping at him open-mouthed, "one of you must go on to the next cottage, and the next, and the next, so as not to break the chain. I have been running hard for two versts calling at every cottage on the way, and I can't do any more—not fast enough, I mean, to be any good."

"I don't understand all this," the woodman muttered, and turned enquiring eyes on Tatiana Leonow. She, too, had jumped out of bed as soon as she heard those running footsteps. She was standing in the doorway of the living-room, listening with beating heart to this talk about the police. She knew what it all meant. She understood it all. Now she came forward.

"How far are we here from Palosan?" she asked the boy.

"Twenty versts," he replied. "Leon Adamovitch was in Palosan at break of day, and he saw the police, six of them and a sergeant, and he heard them enquire everywhere about a cart and two women. But no one had seen anything."

"Then what did they do—the police, I mean?" Tatiana enquired.

"They rode on to Kronine."

"To Kronine?"

The boy grinned. "Yes, to Kronine," he said. "You must know that Leon Adamovitch is a very sharp fellow. And he doesn't like the police. We none of us do. So he put on the face of an idiot, which he knows well how to do, and told them that he had seen a cart which was driven by a woman at full speed in the direction of Kronine, and he got five *kopeks* from the sergeant for telling him that lie. But the sergeant didn't know it was a lie, and he and his men rode off to Kronine, and Leon ran all the way to Dmitri Smirnoff's cottage, which is

the first one on this road. It is a matter of four versts, you know, and Leon told Dmitri all about the cart and the woman and the lie which he had told the police."

"Then what did Dmitri do?"

"He took his turn to enquire at every cottage along the valley if anyone had seen a cart driven by two women. He ran from house to house, never breaking the chain till he came to Ivan Tcherski. All the way along the hooded cart had been seen, also the two women. The old one was driving," the boy went on and looked directly at Tatiana, "and the young one sat beside her, and kept looking down under the hood where there lay someone who was sick. Whether man or woman no one knew."

"And Ivan had seen us, too?"

"Yes. And as Dmitri was tired and footsore from running all the way, it was Ivan's turn to set off and call at every cottage. Most people had seen the cart but it did not halt anywhere. So then I started to run along, and here I am. And this is the end, for I saw a cart with a hood on it standing close by here off the road. And if it is you the police are after, then you must start off at once or you will get Fedor Doumanow into trouble for giving you shelter in the night."

"Yes," Tatiana rejoined simply; "it is me and my daughter the police are after, and we will get at once under way so as not to get Fedor Doumanow into trouble."

The boy had already made ready to go. He was by the door, and now turned in order to say a last word to Tatiana: "You needn't be afraid," was what he said; "not one of us is likely to give you away. Leon, Dmitri, Ivan and I, we all work with our fathers in the forest. We haven't seen you or the cart. We have seen nothing and heard nothing. You must not be afraid."

"I am not afraid," Tatiana responded with a smile. "God guard you and your friends. Be sure He will reward you for what you have done to-day."

As soon as the boy had gone, the woodman ordered his sons to get the cart and horses ready.

"Not that I want to hurry you," he said to Tatiana, "because if young Voluski has got hold of the right story the police will have ridden to Kronine first and made many enquiries before they turned back this way. But," he added significantly, "the longer start you have of them the better it will be for your wounded friend. So, for his sake——"

"Yes, for his sake," Tatiana broke in quietly. "Come and look at him, Fedor Doumanow. And you, too, Maria. And let your daughter come too, and both your sons before they look to our horses."

She led the way to the inner room. The woodman and his wife exchanged a glance of puzzlement before they followed their guest into the sleeping-chamber. Vera was there, standing at the foot of the bed, her hands encircling the post, her eyes fixed upon the Tsar. They all came in now—the woodman, his wife, his two young sons and his daughter, a girl rather younger than Vera. Tatiana made them halt beside the bed, three on one side, two on the other. The Tsar was awake, and looking all the better for a few hours' perfect rest. His eyes responded to Vera's look of worship and under his beard his lips were parted in the ghost of a smile. Tatiana knelt down, made the sign of the Cross on her forehead, her bosom and each side of her breast, and murmured a short prayer. The others, young and old, stood at their posts, silent and watchful, not knowing what to think of it all. Now Tatiana rose and turned unhesitatingly to a small cupboard which in every peasant's cottage in Russia is always built into the wall immediately below the shrine containing the *ikon*. The cupboard is a receptacle for all sacred things—a crucifix, a holy image, small objects which have been blessed by the bishop, all things which have to be kept hidden from spying eyes now that the days were gone when the Little Father was the head of the Church, the worshipper of God and the upholder of the Faith.

"May I open this, Fedor Doumanow?" Tatiana asked of her host.

He nodded assent and she opened the cupboard door. She knew that she would find what she was looking for. It was a picture of the Little Father Tsar. This she took out and held it up for everyone in the room to see. They all looked on the picture and then with one accord, as if moved by an invisible force, they turned their glance to the wounded man on the bed. Slowly, one after the other, they fell on their knees. With folded hands, bent heads and eyes downcast they prayed.

The sick man raised his hand and murmured a blessing on them all.

There was not a dry eye in the room.

The sick man had once more closed his eyes. Vera beckoned to everyone to go out of the room, which they did on tiptoe. Tatiana was the last to go. She knelt down and kissed the hand of the Tsar, and cast a searching, lingering look on his face. That look had something final in it as of a supreme farewell.

They all assembled in the living-room. Only Vera was not with them. Tatiana sat in the big armchair and spoke:

"Now you know," she said, "why we are here. God's anointed, our beloved Tsar, is in danger of death. My husband sacrificed his life to drag him out of the clutches of those sacrilegious murderers up in Moscow. He ordered me to convey His Majesty to the house of Alexei Fedorovitch Patchenko at Varnakieff. This now I cannot do. Even if I have two, three hours' start of the police, their men are mounted and they will come upon me long before I can reach Varnakieff. When they do it will mean death to the Little Father Tsar."

A prolonged groan came in response to this statement of an obvious fact. And Tatiana continued with solemn emphasis:

"It is for you, Fedor Doumanow, for you and your family to protect His Majesty until such time as the great God Himself relieves you from this sacred trust. Are you prepared?"

"What are we to do?" the woodman asked simply.

"God and the Holy Virgin will inspire you, and my daughter Vera will be here to help and to advise."

"But you, Tatiana Leonow?"

"I will continue my way to Varnakieff. Let your sons get the cart and horses ready now, and one of them come with me. On the way I will explain to him what he will have to do. He will bear his part in working for the safety of the Tsar. But you must not be afraid for him, Fedor Doumanow, nor you, Maria. I will watch over your son as I would over my own, and I swear to you before God that he shall come to no harm."

"We are not afraid," the woodman rejoined. "Our lives are in God's hands."

He then told the lads off to get the horses and cart ready.

LEONOW—RUSSIA, 1918

CHAPTER VIII

HALF an hour later Tatiana's preparations were completed and she was ready to start. The cart with the hood up was at the door. She took an affectionate farewell of her host and his family, kissed Vera very tenderly and then climbed into the cart. Nikolai, the woodman's youngest boy, handed a large bundle of what looked like old clothes up to her, after which he went and crouched under the hood, looking back on the road. Tatiana had chosen him to accompany her, because his name was the same as her husband's and the same as the Tsar's, and she had explained to him exactly what he was to do.

She drove slowly down and up the stony road, never looking to right or left, only straight ahead of her. She

had kept going for rather more than half an hour when she came to a point where the valley was at its narrowest and the road, which had risen continually for the past verst, reached a height of some fifty feet above the stream. On the right, the slope closely overspread with forest trees rose sheer above the road. On the left, the rocky ground, sparsely dotted with weather-beaten pines and larches, fell in a steep declivity down to the river-bed.

Here Tatiana pulled up, and the boy Nikolai jumped down from the cart and turned to climb the wooded slope. He had a few tools with him, an axe, a chopper and a saw. At a height of some ten or twelve feet from the level of the road he began using the axe against a tree. Tatiana continued slowly on her way, and then pulled up again. She was still within earshot of the sound of Nikolai's axe striking against the tree. And presently that sound became mingled with another. At first it was the sound of a loose piece of rock rolling down the declivity; this was soon followed by the rapping of iron against stone, and soon after by the jingle of horse-trappings.

The detachment of police was not yet in sight, but it was near enough for all these sounds to rise above the gurgling of the stream.

Tatiana rose from her seat and got down from the cart. She turned the horses' heads and made them pull the cart obliquely across the road. She then took up the bundle of old clothes which she had brought with her and carried it under her arm. She crossed over to the edge of the declivity and looked down into the abyss, fifty feet below. Loosening the bundle, she threw pieces of clothing down. Some bits of rag were caught in the dead branches of a derelict pine, others fluttered down to the edge of the stream. The sound of jingling harness, the snorting of labouring animals, and the clang of iron hoofs against the stony road came louder and more distinct every moment. The police detachment was very near now. A sharp turn of the road brought them in sight.

Tatiana looked up to the skies, blue and clear above

the snow-capped height. She murmured softly to herself: "Our life for the Tsar!" and "Niki, I come!" and without uttering a cry she hurled herself down into the abyss.

Three minutes later the detachment of police was on the spot. The men were ordered to dismount and to examine the cart which had been left standing obliquely across the road. But there was nothing there to be seen. The sergeant questioned his men, rasping out each word rapidly:

"Did you see anything?"

And the replies came equally rapid and curt:

"No, comrade sergeant, nothing."

"What's that?" the sergeant queried abruptly. It was the sound of a woodman's axe striking at a tree.

"There's a lad at work up there," one of the men said; and at a word from the sergeant he called out to Nikolai Doumanow: "Hey, you! Come down."

Nikolai at once came scrambling down from the height. The sergeant questioned him, pointing to the cart:

"Do you know anything about this?"

The boy nodded.

"What do you know?" he was asked.

"It came along half an hour ago," Nikolai replied. "I was at work up there. There were two women in the cart. One of them asked me if she was on the right road to Palosan. I said no, Palosan is the other way and that she would presently find a place where she could turn, and then she would have to go back."

"But she didn't go back," the sergeant remarked.

"No, she did not. She asked me if I knew anything about the police being about, and I said that there was a rumour in our village that there was a detachment of police coming this way, but that it was still a long way off."

"Then what did the woman do?"

"She went on for a little bit. Then she pulled up, and both the women got down——"

The boy paused abruptly. He seemed unable to go on, and suddenly he burst into tears.

"Why, what happened?" the sergeant queried with impatience. "Why do you cry, you young fool?"

By way of a reply Nikolai crossed the road and came to a halt on the brink of the precipice. He turned his head away and tried to master his tears.

"They held hands," he said, his voice broken by sobs, "and threw themselves down there."

The sergeant and the men all gave a gasp. Not that they held the life of a couple of peasants to be in any way precious, but because this *dénouement* was so unexpected.

"What? Both of them?" the sergeant queried.

The boy nodded. He was still sobbing. Two or three of the men ventured to the extreme edge of the declivity and looked down into the abyss below.

"Can you see anything?" the sergeant queried.

"Yes, comrade sergeant. There is a woman's body right down there," one of the men replied.

"And," added another, "she is lying on the top of what looks like another body. There are bits of torn rags all about the place, like pieces of a woman's petticoat; some of them are caught in the branches of that dead tree."

The sergeant, too, went to the brink and had a look down.

"Yes, I can see," he said. "I suppose the women got frightened. I don't blame them," he added cynically. "The Administrator would have made short work of them after all the trouble they gave us."

He then turned to the men.

"Well, there's nothing more to be done now. Just take those horses out of the cart and two of you take them on the lead. There was an *isba* in the village about three versts from here. We'll halt there and then go home and report."

No one took any more notice of Nikolai, who stood

by looking vacant and with tears still coursing down his cheeks. These tears were not shammed. The lad had witnessed the whole tragedy, and had told without hesitation the garbled tale taught him by the dead woman. He was only a child, and the reaction on his sensitive young heart was one of intense horror and sorrow. At the same time, life, which is always hard for the *moujik*, young or old, had taught him to control himself, and from early childhood he had learned the lesson of obedience and of loyalty. These lessons stood him in good stead now, and though sorrow still lingered in his heart, horror of what he had witnessed soon turned to admiration for the woman who had carried loyalty to the length of giving her life for her Emperor, God's own anointed and representative here on earth. And, thank God! what this brave woman had anticipated would certainly come about and her sacrifice would not be in vain. Unless the devil himself intervened, the sergeant and the police would ride past the Doumanows' cottage not suspecting that the great Tsar was lying there, tended lovingly and reverently by Nikolai's father and mother and by Vera Leonow, who was now an orphan.

And so the lad looked on while the men took the horses out of the cart and tied them to their own. He stood by while they mounted and watched the detachment ride away down the road by which they had come. When it was out of sight, he went back to the brink of the abyss. There he knelt down and murmured the prayers which his mother had taught him: prayers for the Tsar and also prayers for the dead.

He waited till nightfall, tearful and hungry, yet strangely happy, for he had borne his share in working for the safety of the great Tsar. When the shades of evening began to draw in, he grasped the shafts of the cart and dragged it along the road, back to his father's cottage.

LEONOW—RUSSIA, 1918

CHAPTER IX

AFTER the tragedy of Tatiana Leonow's death Fedor Doumanow the woodman had the wounded Tsar under his roof for fourteen days. He and his wife, assisted by Vera Leonow, tended him and gave him of their best. They nursed him with as much tender care as they would have bestowed on their own sons. Nikolas II during this time was certainly getting physically better, but it soon became apparent that his mind was slightly deranged. He had gone through so many horrors, suffered such unspeakable privations, that the brain, enfeebled by bodily ailment, refused to act normally just yet. There was a vacant spot in it somewhere which could not take in the altered circumstances, the new surroundings both human and material. The once mighty Tsar of all the Russias did not understand the truckle-bed, the coarse linen, the tin mug in which he was given tea to drink; nor did he understand the man with the tousled hair and unkempt beard, or the woman with the rough clothes that smelt of pine-oil, and large hands often clasped in prayer. His eyes, circled with purple, would wander vacantly over these strange objects and unfamiliar faces, and then he would frown as if he tried—tried hard to take it all in, to reconcile what he remembered of the past with what he experienced in the present. He spoke very little, and when he did he appeared to find difficulty in articulating.

One thing, and one thing only, seemed from time to time to bring the wandering mind back to reality: this was the touch of Vera's hand. The sick man would hold it and cling on to it for hours at a stretch, and the girl was quite content to sit or kneel beside the bed with

her hand clasped in his. She would sit and kneel there till her whole body was numb and cramped, with no other comfort to help her bear the strain but an occasional look of love and gratitude from those tired eyes, which had in the past the power to make men tremble at a glance.

The woodman spent the intervening fortnight in collecting what money and savings he had and borrowing what he had not. His boy had brought home the cart left derelict by the police on the roadside, but a horse was needed, and Vera had not enough wherewith to purchase one and leave her with a sufficient amount in hand to continue the journey as far as Varnakieff. So many things might happen on the way, and His Majesty must not be allowed to suffer more privations than were absolutely inevitable. So it was left to Fedor Doumanow to raise what money he could among the neighbours. Not that he experienced any difficulty. It soon transpired throughout the small villages dotted about on the mountain slopes that a great and wonderful thing had happened to Fedor Doumanow. The Little Father had come to him and was dwelling under his roof. How the amazing news got about it is difficult to say, but it did reach the outlying hamlets of Striark and Tenenko and others lying farther still; and when the woodman or his family came tramping over the passes and called on their friends to help them with money wherewith to purchase a horse, they knew why the horse was wanted. They gave what they could, and much that they could not spare, but they made no remark: they said nothing and asked no questions. They knew.

And after two weeks of tireless efforts enough money was collected and a good strong horse was purchased in the market at Palosan. Prayers were said morning and evening in Fedor Doumanow's cottage for the safe journey of the Little Father to the house of Alexei Patchenko in Varnakieff, and in the little church up at the top of the Mirski height a solemn service of prayer for his safety was said by the saintly priest, at which all

the able-bodied population of the neighbouring villages assisted.

It was Vera Leonow who came one day to the conclusion that the illustrious patient could now with comparative safety continue the journey to Varnakieff. She took an affectionate farewell of her kind hosts, and for four days and three nights after that she drove the cart with its precious burden over the rough mountain roads, resting whenever necessary in wayside cottages, where she was always sure of meeting both kindness and hospitality. On the fourth day she arrived at Varnakieff and there was received by Alexei Patchenko, a large-hearted and loyal ex-officer of the old army, who had found refuge in this out-of-the-world village lost among the forests and crags of the Urals, where he continued in his quiet way to work for the one great ideal of his life—the restoration of Nikolas II to the throne of his forebears. It was nothing short of miraculous how Alexei Patchenko contrived to know and to keep in touch with every man, however humble, who was of his own way of thinking, with all those, in fact, who would be ready to come forward if called upon to take up arms for the cause which lay so near their heart. Peasants and workers, loyal soldiers, the Cossacks of the Ural and the Don, and the wandering tribesmen on the steppes—Patchenko knew them all. With him, the whole year was spent in travelling from one end of South-Eastern Russia to the other: from Ufa and Samara to Orenburg and Tsaritsyn as far as Astrakhan, in a ceaseless endeavour to hearten those who still believed that God was on the side of the old *régime* and would Himself intervene in the restoration of the Little Father to his throne and in the destruction of his enemies.

All this went on while on the other side of the great river the most brutal and ruthless fight ever known to history was raging. Wrangel, Denikin and their White Army were making a last desperate stand against

Bolshevism. But all in vain, alas! for Bolshevism was victorious all along the line, driving southwards before it the starving and exhausted defenders of civilisation, and leaving in its rear, as Attila and his Huns had done fifteen hundred years ago, a trail of fire and massacre, of rapine and outrage and wholesale devastation. But Patchenko paid no heed to the rumours which came floating across the Volga on clouds reeking of blood and smoke. His mission was to hearten those who still believed in God, to keep fresh in their minds thoughts of loyalty and simple domestic virtues. Bolshevism had not yet invaded the outlying provinces of South-Eastern Russia nor the territories of the nomadic tribes who pitched their tents on the great steppes when spring clothed the plains with a living carpet of wild flowers, and, when the wandering spirit moved them, trekked away again. It was in the humble peasants and workers and in the wild, independent tribesmen that Patchenko pinned his faith that this awful Bolshevism of which he had heard rumours was only a phase in the history of mankind, decreed by God for the scourging of the unbeliever and the rebel and the chastening of those of weak faith. He had no knowledge as yet of the appalling tragedy of Yekaterinburg, nor of the great honour and mercy which God had reserved for him.

The once mighty Tsar of all the Russias entered the modest abode of Alexei Fedorovitch Patchenko on an improvised stretcher on the seventh day of August, 1918, twenty-one days after the appalling tragedy of Yekaterinburg. News of that tragedy had not yet penetrated to these out-of-the-way corners of the earth. But Patchenko knew at once who it was that was brought on a stretcher under his roof. He and his young nephew, who was his faithful attendant, lifted the Tsar from the cart, brought him into the house and laid him down on the best bed. As soon as he appeared to be comfortable and at peace, Vera and the two men knelt down beside

him and rendered thanks to God for the safety of their Emperor.

The great and noble Tsar, God's own anointed, had come into this lowly abode just as Christ Himself had come into the world in a stable in Bethlehem. Here, too, the news spread like wildfire throughout the province, and poor people who lived many versts away came tramping over the mountains in order to catch a glimpse of one who, next to God, and his saints, was for them the most sacred being on earth.

It is a little difficult for the enlightened people of the West to understand this naïve worship of a man who, frankly be it spoken, had never been a whole-hearted friend of the poor, and had never tried to come in direct contact with them. Throughout his reign he had done very little for their welfare, holding himself aloof, like an idol, from the cares and troubles of his lowly subjects. It may have been this very aloofness which earned for him the veneration of the ignorant; and at no time was this veneration so apparent as it was during the next three years, when the fate of Russia, and probably that of Europe, hung in the balance, and the hand which had once wielded one of the most powerful sceptres in the world clung, inert and helpless, to that of a young girl. And all this while these simple and loyal folk who came to gaze on him were risking their lives for the sake of their faith in him. One word thoughtlessly spoken, one man less loyal than his kind, a child's indiscretion, or a woman's careless tongue, and at the first inkling that the ex-Tsar was alive and in hiding whole villages for many versts around would be put to fire and sword. Nevertheless they came in their hundreds, for the Russian peasant is essentially a mystic, and deeply religious. The idea of God's anointed dwelling under the humble roof of Alexei Patchenko, who was one of themselves, appealed to their spiritual perceptions in the same manner that their ikons appealed to them. They would kneel down beside the bed where he lay and say their prayers at his

feet, just as they did before the images of their patron saints.

And this naïve worship warmed the sick man's heart. He had witnessed so much brutality, such inhuman vindictiveness, even against innocent women and children, that his faith not only in mankind but even in the goodness of God had received a severe shaking and had partially enfeebled his brain. But he, just like the most ignorant of his subjects, was also a mystic, and with the veneration accorded to him his belief in God and in himself returned. They spoke to him as to the representative of God upon earth, and his mind promptly went back to the faith of his childhood, to the belief that he was the chosen of God, and on one occasion when the names of his dead wife and of his dead children were spoken in his hearing, a look of ecstasy came into his eyes, he put out his arms and murmured softly: "When my work is done, my beloved ones, I will come to you."

LEONOW—RUSSIA, 1918

CHAPTER X

It was in this wonderful setting of rugged mountains and dark, impenetrable forests, with the blue sky overhead and the snow-clad heights far away reflecting the glow of sunset or of dawn, that Vera Leonow wove the thread of her romance. Unbeknown to herself, her idealism for the ex-Tsar turned to very real, entirely human love. Her solicitude for him brought back at times a smile to his wan face, and that smile made this girl more happy than any sight in the world could have done. She tended him like a mother, and loved him as a mother, but also as a woman and a devotee. She was, of course, far too

ignorant to put any of her thoughts on paper, but Alexei Patchenko, who saw that innocent idyll grow and unfold under his roof, did write a most touching account of it, recording its phases week by week.¹

But the idyll, beautiful as it was, could not last. Months went by and then a year, and Nikolas II, with mental faculties restored, could no longer rest in idleness under Patchenko's roof. He was still a sick man, a very sick man indeed. He had suffered too many privations ever to enjoy complete health again; his courage was great, however, and he struggled valiantly against increasing weakness. Patchenko and the young nephew were his staunch attendants and Vera Leonow his devoted nurse. News of his presence in Varnakieff never reached Moscow, but it spread all over South-Eastern Russia, and petitions soon began to pour in from those remote provinces begging in the name of all loyal subjects for a sight of their Little Father; urging, too, that many waverers and weak-hearted ones would soon return to the fold if they knew that the Tsar had, as it were, come back from the dead in order to recover his throne. It soon became known that these petitions would be granted. Alexei Patchenko was ready to pledge his word that the coming spring would see the great Tsar once more amongst his faithful people. He made plans for an extensive pilgrimage which His

¹ *Author's Note.* These papers, which to my mind bear the undisputable hall-mark of truth as well as of mysticism and poetry, Patchenko bequeathed to his brother's son Dmitri Ivanovitch. His death did not occur till 1927 and the following year Dmitri succeeded in making his way into Transylvania (once part of Hungary, but handed over to Roumania by the Treaty of Trianon), where he married and settled down in Czege, a small village still the property of some members of my family, taking the precious papers with him. That is how I was privileged to see them. They were, of course, written in Russian, but Dmitri Ivanovitch Patchenko had learnt some Hungarian by then, and was able to give me a fairly understandable translation of that wonderful document, and to supplement it with details of the subsequent dramatic events, all of which I could not resist putting on record. Dmitri Ivanovitch would never consent to part with the papers, and as he is still alive I have no reason to doubt that they are still in existence and in his possession.—E. O.

Majesty would make in the provinces of Samara and Kazan as far as Ufa, then down to those of Saratof and Astrakhan, also visiting the chiefs of the nomadic tribes on the steppes. The Cossacks of the Don and the Ural could be relied on, the Kirghiz hordes were loyal, so were the Kalmucks. Ideas of revolution, of Soviets and other newfangled notions had not yet penetrated to these outposts of civilisation, where God and the Tsar were still the only recognised dictators before whom every knee must bow, and where the immensity of the plains and the far-distant horizon as well as Nature in her angry moods, her devastating storms, her scorching summer sun and her winter blizzards, spoke of a power infinitely greater than any that man could arrogate to himself.

Those were the people among whom the Little Father would now wander in an atmosphere of whole-hearted devotion, collecting around his sacred person thousands upon thousands of faithful liegemen eager to follow him, to fight for him and to die in his cause if need be.

The days went by; the weather, never very scorching in this mountainous part of the country, was at its best this year. A blue sky, warm summer days, mellow autumn evenings, exquisite dawns and prolonged twilight, all these boons of kindly Nature called to the sick man to make an effort to be up and doing. Then when autumn and winter came, sitting by the fire in Patchenko's house, Vera would discuss with the old man the possibility of starting soon now on what would be a pilgrimage to the provinces which the Bolshevik propaganda had as yet failed to reach—the vast steppes and mountain villages where wandering hordes gave no allegiance to the dictators up in Moscow, had never even heard of Vladimir Iljitch Lenin, and acknowledged no authority after God save their chief and the Tsar.

"We must have horses," Vera said when the journey was discussed. "His Majesty was always fond of riding. It will tire him less and be more dignified for him than a jolting *tarantass*."

"I will find the horses," Alexei Patchenko said simply.

"And there must be an escort. His Majesty must be suitably guarded."

"I will find the escort," Alexei said again.

"But the money . . . ?" Vera hazarded. She looked troubled because she knew that Alexei Patchenko was not a rich man, and that it would take a great deal of money to keep up a suitable escort for His Imperial Majesty. Where was this money to come from? But once again Patchenko asserted quite simply: "I will find the money."

And he did. God and His angels alone knew how he did it, but he procured horses for riding and mules for transport and men whose pride it would be to escort the Little Father on his travels. God and His angels alone knew how money was collected amongst men who were still on the brink of starvation.

And on an exquisite morning in early spring, when the dawn flooded the snow-capped heights with rose and citron lights and flashed sparks of crimson and gold on church towers and cupolas, the great Tsar and his escort started on their pilgrimage. There surely had never been seen in all history so motley a *cortège*. The Tsar, riding a sturdy mountain pony, wore a dark mantle buttoned up to his chin and falling in folds over the pony's crupper. He held his head high, and his glance which swept over the plains to far-distant heights or limitless horizon was that of a dreamer, of one whom Destiny had taken in hand, and who was willing to let himself drift, feeling himself too weak to resist.

And riding behind him or in the van were his attendants, volunteers gathered together by Alexei Patchenko, men who wore on their wan faces the imprint of their mysticism, their readiness to give their life for the furtherance of an ideal; clad in ragged goatskin coats, they rode mountain ponies or mules. Their feet were wrapped in sandals held together by leather straps. They were a rough-looking lot, bearded and unkempt; their sunken eyes bore testimony to malnutrition and the

misery they had endured during years of starvation, with wife broken in health and children crying for food. Stolid and silent, they bore the hardships of the road with the same patience that they had shown to the grim spectre of Death when he knocked at their door. Their allegiance was to the Tsar. They knew nothing, and cared less, for all that talk up in Moscow which promised lasting prosperity and contentment to the starving millions of Russia.

In the rear of this strange cavalcade came the familiar old cart, driven by Vera Leonow and laden with such provisions as could be gathered on the way.

For close on two years did these pilgrims wander along mountain roads and passes, through villages and townships, meeting with men as undaunted and as loyal as they. They roamed over the vast steppes of South-Eastern Russia, where wandering tribes pitched their tents and swore loyalty to the cause of the great Tsar whom a miracle had saved from the brutality of the Bolsheviks. To the Tsar himself these long days of riding across the steppes brought immense contentment and joy, and the delight of absolute surprise. He had never traversed this part of his empire before. A great love for it surged up in his heart, and a longing to lay down, if Destiny allowed it, sceptre and crown, and to end his days beneath this translucent sky in a simple peasant's hut, with Vera to look after him and kind, humble friends to help him forget all the past, the horrors and the misery, the pomp and the final downfall. The charm of the steppes held him in its grip. He loved them in the spring, when the bright emerald hue of the grass lay hidden beneath the dazzling carpet of crocus and bluebells, of veronica and multi-coloured pinks; when the air was fresh and fragrant and the birds were in full song. He loved to watch ponies and cattle tread their way knee-deep through this ocean of verdure and of flowers. He even came to love the steppes in late summer, when the soil had become arid and dark, when

the heat of the day was overpowering and the sun rose and set like an immense ball of fire on the far-distant horizon. He bore, with the same patience as his men, the discomforts of those torrid days, when clouds of scorching dust rose from the thirsty earth and lent to his wan face and sunken cheeks the copper hue of a Kirghiz or a Kalmuck. But, above all, he loved the early days of autumn when in the remote distance the cloud of dust became as ethereal as a vapour, behind which the setting sun flaunted the splendour of its gold and crimson fire. All of this he loved, for he had learned to understand Nature and to appreciate her many moods, even to the gales of wind that swept over his beloved plains, cut down the withered grass and the flowers, and sent them rolling along like immense trusses, gathering size and weight as they rolled. Even to the storms and rains of late autumn and the bitterness of winter with its rigours and pitiless snow.

Twice during his pilgrimage did the man who had once been the mighty Tsar of all the Russias see the turn of the year in these unknown parts of his lost empire. Close on two years went by before rumours of his strange Odyssey penetrated to the outside world, to London and to Fleet Street. Nikolas II, the ex-Tsar was alive, so rumour would have it. He had been seen and spoken to in many of the provinces of South-Eastern Russia. He was being venerated as God's anointed. Men, so it was asserted, were rallying round him and to his cause. The wandering tribes of the steppes were ready to follow him and to fight for him in their thousands and hundreds of thousands. Here was the first menace, the first probable check to Bolshevik domination. An army was gathering round the Imperial standard. The ex-Tsar was out to reconquer his throne.

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BOOK II
ESTHER—LONDON, 1922



Esther.

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ESTHER CURRYER stood in front of her mirror and gave her whole appearance a final critical survey. She was going to the fancy-dress ball which had been organised by several Society ladies in aid of the funds for the relief of Russian refugees. It was one of the big events of the season and a great deal of fun was anticipated for young and old from the fact that masks would be worn by the men but not by the ladies unless they wished. Large supper-parties were arranged to take place at midnight. Everything would be very brilliant and very expensive, and would be certain of success both socially and financially. Royalty had signified its gracious intention to be present, and everyone would be there who was willing to pay five guineas for an evening's entertainment. Esther could not possibly have afforded this extravagance, but she and her brother John were being taken to the ball by Mrs. Kay Snowden, a dear, kind extremely wealthy American, who seemed to find her greatest joy in giving pleasure to her young friends.

And Esther, standing in front of her mirror, was satisfied with her appearance. She had chosen a costume to represent her Biblical namesake. Like her she had "put on her royal apparel" and the dress became her to perfection. She was tall and the rich dark draperies became her stately figure and suited her warm colouring. Yes, she was looking her best to-night, and she knew it, even though there was a look in her eyes and about her mouth which did not altogether make for real beauty. It was a look almost of discontent, with a droop at the corners of the mouth which suggested that, in spite of

the joyous anticipation of social success, Esther Curryer was not happy!

She gave a quick, short sigh and turned away from the mirror. There was a knock at the door, and without waiting for permission to enter, her brother John made irruption into the room with a hearty:

"Hello! Ready? . . ."

He looked splendid as Harlequin in a skin-tight garment of many colours, his fair hair tucked under a close-fitting skull-cap. He carried his mock sword and his mask in his hand. His merry grey eyes twinkled with admiration at sight of his beautiful sister.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "you do look stunning, and no mistake."

He paused a moment, and added: "Old Alvalho is a lucky chap."

Esther made no remark on this. She busied herself with some objects on her dressing-table and then said casually:

"Mrs. Snowden is late."

"Oh, I meant to tell you! She telephoned a little while ago that she would be here at ten o'clock. She didn't think it would be any good going earlier."

There was nothing more said for the moment. Esther, feeling her brother's eyes scrutinising her face, turned slightly away, seeing which he came up to her, took hold of her wrists, and somehow compelled her to return his glance.

"You are not happy, Esther," he said simply.

"How can I be?" she retorted, and gently disengaged her hands.

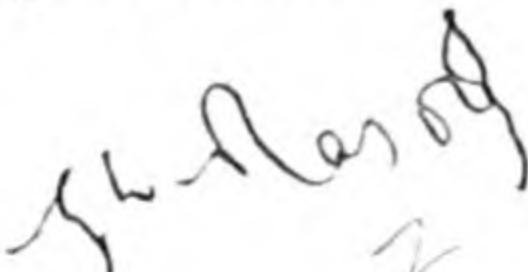
"You don't care for Alvalho, do you?"

"You know I don't."

"I thought that perhaps——" John broke off abruptly, and after a moment or two went on with a quick sigh: "And he is such a good fellow."

"He is," Esther assented with conviction. "That's just the trouble."

Again there was silence between them for a few



seconds while John was debating within himself whether he would put the momentous question to his sister or not. At last he made up his mind.

"Why go through with it, darling," he asked, "if you don't care?"

"How can I help it?" she countered vehemently. "Father is up to his eyes in debt to Miguel Alvalho. He hasn't got a penny now of his own and we are all of us dependent on Miguel's bounty. A month ago father got fifty thousand pounds from him with which to satisfy his creditors. . . . Fifty thousand! If Miguel hadn't given him the money father would be in jail now. You know that, Johnnie dear, as well as I do."

"Father has been very foolish," Johnnie said with a sigh.

"Foolish!" she exclaimed. "You mean *criminal*."

"Don't say that, Esther. I know you feel very bitterly about it, but poor old father has been more sinned against than sinning. He was just talked over by those City sharks——"

"He had no business to be mixed up with City sharks. Men in his position ought to keep clear of those dirty financial transactions. What business has a man like father to be director of a company? Those others only wanted him and that fool Thurnham on their board because of their titles. They were the bait which the snobs of Ealing or Richmond swallowed greedily and then cried out because they lost their money. Serve them jolly well right, too!"

"Well! poor old Thurnham is in gaol. Awful idea! One of the oldest Irish baronies. He couldn't pay up——"

"And father only could because Miguel gave him the money."

"Which was jolly fine of him. He must have known that he would never see his fifty thousand again."

"Exactly. And that is why I am marrying Miguel Alvalho. He has paid fifty thousand pounds for me. I suppose he thinks I am worth it, though God knows . . .

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Anyway, I am going through with it. We can't all remain under such a load of obligation to a Portuguese Jew——”

“Esther!” her brother exclaimed hotly, “you mustn’t talk like that. Throughout all this miserable business Miguel has behaved like a perfect gentleman. He was kind and generous to a fault, and always treats father with perfect deference, almost as if he were the debtor and father the creditor. No Englishman—Christian, Jew, or Mahomedan—could have behaved with a finer sense of honour. I won’t even speak of his love for you,” he went on more soberly, “for that is one of the most wonderful things I have ever seen in all my life. He positively worships the ground you walk on.”

The girl made no reply to all this, wishing, perhaps, to ignore the scarcely veiled reproach in Johnnie’s vehement tirade. They were very fond of one another, these two. They were both schoolchildren when their mother had died, and ever since then they had been thrown a great deal in one another’s company during holiday time. They had the same tastes: winter sports, outdoor life, hunting and racing until the financial crash came, and a great and sincere affection had risen in their hearts for one another and gathered strength as they grew older.

Johnnie knew, of course, or rather had guessed, that Esther was not making a love match, but he had not realised until to-night how bitter she was about it all and how resentful she felt against their father, whose criminal conduct—there was no other word for it—had practically forced her into this marriage. Esther’s face had flamed up when first he took up the cudgels in favour of her future husband, and she turned away from him so as to hide the tears which had gathered in her eyes and were threatening to run down her cheeks. She sat down at her dressing-table with her back to Johnnie, and mopped her eyes with a corner of her handkerchief, seeing which he felt remorseful. He didn’t want to hurt her, but he liked Miguel Alvalho, and felt that Esther was not giving the man what he boyishly called “a fair deal.”

" You must remember, darling," he now said, " that Miguel is not the man to do anyone a good turn for the sake of getting something out of them. Your saying that he has bought you is, of course, sheer nonsense. You are not going to tell me, for one thing, that he got anything out of giving Nowell that marvellous chance."

Then, as Esther seemed still entrenched behind a barrier of obstinate silence, Johnnie went on, still harping on the same subject:

" Two thousand a year for looking after a lot of niggers on that plantation—sugar, isn't it? I never even knew before where British Guiana was! Miguel did speak about it to me, you know. But the crash was on its way then. He foresaw it, of course, and thought I ought not to leave you, so he offered the job to Nowell. He spoke to me about that only yesterday and said he was quite sure he could get me something equally good as soon as you and he were married and he had the right to look after you. I tell you," Johnnie exclaimed enthusiastically, " he is the finest fellow you could meet in a day's march, and what more you want in a husband I can't imagine!"

He drew a deep sigh and concluded sententiously: " Women are queer cattle, and no mistake."

Esther rose from the table and turned to Johnnie with an indulgent smile.

" You are quite right, dear," she said lightly. " I suppose we do seem queer to you men at times. But there's nothing to be done about that, I'm afraid. You will be falling in love presently and, maybe, I shall thoroughly dislike the woman whom you will be worshipping on bended knees. There's no accounting for tastes in such matters, is there, dear?"

Johnnie assented with a grunt. For the first time in his life he was genuinely vexed with Esther. But nothing more could be said just now. The maid came in to say that Mrs. Kay Snowden was waiting in the car. Esther picked up her coat and turned out the lights. She and her brother John then went downstairs together.

ESTHER—LONDON, 1922

CHAPTER XII

I THINK most of us remember reading about that marvellous function at the Albert Hall during the winter of 1922, in aid of the Russian refugees—a very popular charity in those early days after the Bolshevik revolution. It was the most brilliant affair that had been witnessed in London since pre-War time. Everybody was there who was anybody, and lots of those who were nobody at all. People who were there all agreed that there had never been such a crowd in the Albert Hall before. The crush was terrific. At one time one could scarcely move. The dancing-floor was just a solid mass of couples, who had to cling to one another breast to breast and cheek to cheek, and those who had foolishly chosen to wear elaborate medieval dresses could not dance at all, for there was no room in that throng for voluminous draperies.

But it all went off very well. Young and old were determined to enjoy themselves, and they did. As a matter of fact, experience in such matters has before now proclaimed that the people who go to functions of that sort really like a crush. As one lady who was present declared to a friend who was not: "My dear, it was positively divine. By eleven o'clock there was not even standing room on the floor."

Esther was an indefatigable dancer, and a perfect one at that: tango, fox-trot, waltz, she had been on her feet for close on two hours when the band struck up the inevitable "Blue Danube," and brother John made a bee-line for her, insisting that she should dance it with him, which she did. When the dance was over both she and Johnnie were very hot and quite breathless.

"There's nobody quite like you, Esther, for these Viennese waltzes," he said, panting.

"Let's go somewhere and get cool," she begged.

"The box is the best, and there's a bar quite close."

"Can we get through this crowd?"

"Come along."

Brother John steered her through the crowd, which by now had invaded staircases and corridors, and together they arrived unharmed at Mrs. Kay Snowden's box. There was no one there. The old lady had presumably gone to another box to chat with a crony. Esther sank into an armchair with a sigh which was not of weariness but entirely of pleasure.

"You would like a drink, wouldn't you?" Johnnie asked.

"I am pining for one."

"What would you like?"

"Anything cool," she replied. "But you'll never get near the buffet."

"Oh, yes, I shall . . . in time," he retorted laughing, and darted off in the direction of the bar, leaving the door of the box slightly ajar.

As soon as he had gone Esther fetched out her flap-jack and lipstick and, as her American friend would have put it, proceeded to "fix her face" in front of the mirror on the wall. She then switched off the light and sank back against the cushions of the chair with a sigh of well-being. It was delicious to be by oneself after all the noise and turmoil down below, and lovely to be in the dark away from the glare. The band was playing a tango, people were still dancing, and the exotic lilt struck pleasantly on the girl's ear. She closed her eyes, enjoying this moment of quietude.

On the whole she felt that she was having a happy time, for she had been much feted and admired: more so than usual, for Esther Curryer had never been what might be called a "popular" girl. Her father was reputed to be wealthy, and as soon as she was officially

"out" she presided over those splendid parties which he gave in his fine house in Grosvenor Square. She was also very beautiful, but young men and girls somehow fought shy of her. They said that she was *clever*: an unforgivable offence in the eyes of those modern, empty-headed jackanapes, whose thoughts were centred either on themselves and their ilk, or else on their favourite sport.

Older men, on the other hand, liked to talk to Esther Curryer for the same reason that the young ones shunned her. Sarcasm aimed at others is always pleasant to hear: the girl was amusing and witty, and one could talk to her on subjects other than the latest Society scandal. To-night, however, had been different. It was an open secret that her engagement to Sir Miguel Alvalho would be made public during a supper-party which he was giving to a number of friends on both sides, and Esther found herself in consequence one of the heroines of the evening. Everyone, ladies especially, like to hear of a coming marriage when the man is wealthy and the girl is beautiful, and hearty congratulations were showered on Esther to the accompaniment of playful, if somewhat trite allusions to King Ahasuerus.

She gave a quick sigh of impatience at recollection of the fulsome adulation which had been showered upon her by many who of late had been rather inclined to cold-shoulder her. It was pretty generally known by now that Lord Frederick Curryer was deeply involved in the Rodensen crash, and had only escaped criminal prosecution by throwing the whole of his private fortune in the melting-pot. He had given up his house in Grosvenor Square and moved to a much smaller one in Egerton Crescent. He had sold his place in Wiltshire, and his shooting-box in Scotland. Hunting, racing, yachting, all these were things of the past for Esther and Johnnie. But all those sacrifices were nothing like enough. The crisis, indeed, would have left Lord Frederick Curryer not only beggared but disgraced, had it not been for the generosity of a friend who, it was

said, helped him to pay up his liabilities to the last farthing.

Then it was that malicious tongues started to wag, saying that poor old Thurnham was sitting in gaol at the present moment for much the same crime that Curryer had committed, he not being blessed with a beautiful daughter whom he could offer to one of the richest men in England in exchange for a satisfactory financial transaction. But even malicious tongues were silenced when the question of such a brilliant matrimonial event came on the *tapis*, together with the prospect of grandiose entertainments, balls and dinner-parties to which one could only hope to be invited if one remained in the good graces of the beautiful bride and the munificent bridegroom.

Esther's sigh had ended in a yawn, whereupon a man's voice suddenly came to her from somewhere out of the gloom.

"Why these sighs, beautiful Esther?" said the voice.
"Ahasuerus must be a fool. He should be here at your feet turning those sighs into laughter."

The girl looked round. A man, in the white costume of a pierrot and wearing a mask, had pushed his way into the box. Without waiting for permission, he closed the door behind him, drew the curtains in the front close together and, disdaining the chairs, flopped down on the ground at her feet. He drew his knees up to his chin and encircled them with his arms.

Esther felt rather amused at his impudence. All she could see of him was the black skull-cap that covered the top of his head, his knees in the white satin trousers and his plentifully befloured hands. She couldn't see his face at all, for the upper part was hidden by the mask, which, in addition, had a curtain of thick black lace falling over the mouth and chin. Yes, Esther Curryer was certainly amused. This was a merry evening when no kind of fun or impudence could, by tacit agreement, be resented, and men wore masks for the express purpose

of indulging in tomfoolery without fear of subsequent black looks or reprisals.

This pierrot, however, seemed sober enough. After that rather trite introductory tirade he passed a few conventional remarks about the crowd, the noise and the glare. His voice sounded unreal and muffled under the mask, and Esther was beginning to wonder who he was and what in the world had brought him here, or whether he had perhaps mistaken her for somebody else.

But something about this Pierrot disturbed her. She didn't quite know what, but somehow he got on her nerves with his cool impertinence and his intriguing personality; so much so that she caught herself wishing that Johnnie would come back, and was even thinking of rising and leaving pierrot in occupation of the box.

And suddenly, apropos of nothing at all, he gave a slight laugh, and she exclaimed:

"Nowell!"

She no longer wondered. She knew. The voice had been disguised, but the laughter could not be, even though there was an ugly, harsh ring in it, quite different to Nowell's light-hearted, irresponsible gaiety. After her final exclamation she felt herself gasping for breath.

"I thought——" she murmured vaguely.

"That I was miles and miles away," he broke in, "bullying niggers in British Guiana. Well, here I am. . . ."

He whisked off his mask and looked up at her, blinking through the powder that clung to his eyelashes. The look in his eyes made her turn her head away. As she said nothing he went on after a time:

"I shouldn't be here, only that I heard . . ."

Esther remained obstinately silent for a moment or two. Indeed, she was trying hard to master her nerves, which were very much on edge. She kept on fidgeting with her handkerchief. Her hands were hot, and her fingers all of a quiver.

Suddenly he asked:

"Are you happy to-night, Esther?"

Still she didn't speak.

"Or are you angry with me for disturbing you?"

Without turning her head she then murmured:

"You were going to tell me what it was you heard . . . and why you came."

"I heard that Lord Frederick was in trouble."

"Oh, my dear," she countered dryly, "that is ancient history."

"I suppose so; but on the Alvalho plantations one only hears of things when they have become ancient history. Don't you suppose that I should have been here before if I had known?"

"But why, Nowell? Why?" she exclaimed hotly.

And as he made no immediate reply, she insisted more calmly: "Why did you leave your work out there? You only took it up a year ago. You can't have got leave yet. And," she added, after a slight pause, "you couldn't anyhow, help father, even if he needed your help."

"I know that. And you know quite well why I left my work and came back. You see, I was, as usual, an ignorant fool, and came to my own stupid conclusions. I heard rumours about Lord Frederick's trouble and nothing about you. So I thought that I would get back to England and try and find a job somewhere nearer home; I thought that we could get married and I could look after you if the trouble was as bad as people out there made out. You see what a fool I am. I always was."

All Esther could murmur was: "You didn't know?"

"No, I did not. How could I? One gets English papers out there, of course, but I was up country, and those I got were mostly two months old. There was no mention of your engagement to Miguel Alvalho in the last one I saw."

"It was only decided a month ago."

"And is to be publicly announced after the ball to-night. I know that also. I read about it in the *Morning Post*, so I made up my mind to come here and get a glimpse of you. I hired this silly costume, and here

I am. I hoped that I wouldn't meet anyone who would recognise me, but the first person I came across in the hall was Alvalho. He looked superb in his Oriental robes. Unfortunately he caught sight of me before I had put my mask on."

"Why 'unfortunately'?"

"Well, I am not exactly his devoted friend, am I?"

"He is very kind. He will understand that you were anxious . . . about father, and he will . . ."

"Yes," he retorted dryly, "I am sure that he will understand that I was anxious about 'father,' and he will be very kind and allow me to take up my job again. He even asked me to come to his supper-party to-night."

"But you refused, of course."

"No fear! I want to be present when the happy event is announced and a crowd of jackanapes drinks your health and wishes you lifelong happiness. I wouldn't miss it for worlds."

"Nowell," she protested hotly, "you must not talk like that!"

"Like what?"

"It isn't like you to be so bitter—so hard. . . . You don't understand . . . you can't . . .!"

"Yes, my dear, I do understand," he now said more quietly, and his voice, which up to now had certainly sounded both ironic and harsh, took on a tone of great tenderness. "I do understand, and that's just the trouble. I know all about that Rodensen crash by now, of course. I know that your father was a director of that scoundrel's companies, and that the directors were being prosecuted for fraudulent conversion of capital and what not. I know that poor old Thurnham, whom I know well, is in gaol at the present moment, and that Lord Frederick would probably be there now were it not that a rich friend put down a fortune for him whereabouts to satisfy his creditors. It wasn't difficult to put two and two together after that, was it, my dear? Alvalho was your father's friend. You were the priceless bait . . ."

"Nowell!" the girl broke in vehemently, "I won't have you talk like that. You are insinuating that father . . ." She checked herself, while a hot flush of shame or indignation, or both, spread over her cheeks and forehead.

"Sold you to Alvalho," Nowell rejoined dryly.
"Well, didn't he?"

"No! no!" she protested. "I . . ."

But words failed her there. How could she lie to Nowell? How could she say to him: "I promised to marry Miguel Alvalho because I love him"? That lie would do for others, who might—probably would—believe; but not for Nowell Ffoulkes, the playmate of her childhood, the lover of later years. Nor could she meet his eyes with their searching look, their look of understanding and of pitiful tenderness. She turned her head away and raised her handkerchief to her eyes. The next moment she felt his hand close over hers.

"Nowell! . . . Please!" she protested, and tried to free her hand; but he would not let it go.

"Why mustn't I hold your hand?" he asked. "It is not so very long ago that I held you—yes, you—all of you—in my arms. My God, to think that I shall never hold you like that again! Your eyes were closed and your lips were parted. You let me kiss you then as I had never kissed you before. I was going away the next day and I never saw you again until to-night. And now you will not even let me hold your hand. Others will, why not I?"

"Because the past is the past, Nowell dear," the girl murmured with a pathetic note of appeal in her voice.
"We must try and forget."

"Forget! That's a good word, isn't it? Yes, I suppose you will forget, and presently you will think that I have forgotten, too. Because after to-day—after to-night I shall pass out of your life. I shall become one of the crowd whom you may meet some time in the far future when you will have completely forgotten that you once lay in my arms with eyes closed and lips parted,

and I held you closer to me than man ever held a woman before. I held you with my soul, Esther, with my heart, and with my body, and you belonged to me more completely during that heaven-sent moment than you ever will belong to Miguel Alvalho, even though he will be your husband, and I never meant anything more to you than a playmate."

"Playmate! Nowell!" she exclaimed reproachfully.
"How can you!"

"Nothing more than a playmate, my dear. You never loved me, you know. You were too young, too inexperienced . . ."

"And you, Nowell—did you ever love me? I have often wondered. Could you have gone away if you had really loved me?"

"I went because I thought that you were rich, and I had nothing in the world to offer you."

"The time-worn excuse of the lukewarm lover."

He made no sign to show how terribly she was hurting him. He did not even now release her hand. All he did was to ask very quietly:

"Are you going to hate me after this, Esther?"

"Hate you, Nowell? What utter nonsense. British Guiana and the niggers must have addled your brains or you wouldn't say such stupid things."

"I wish to God they had, for then that idiotic brain of mine would be so muddled that it couldn't take in the fact that you are going to be another man's wife."

"A man who loves me devotedly. Ask Johnnie, and he will tell you that Miguel Alvalho worships the ground I walk on."

The words were hardly out of her mouth before she repented of them, for she had looked him straight in the face while she spoke, and there came an expression of despair in his eyes, a look of utter hopelessness that would haunt her, she knew, for months and years, if not for ever after. She had only caught that look for one second: the next he had already released her hand and his head was bent down, so that all she saw of him was, like at

first, the black silk cap, his knees in the white satin trousers, and his befloured hands clasped tightly together.

Esther looked down at the bent head, and there in the semi-gloom, with no one to witness or to scoff, her deep, dark eyes took on a look of pity and of very great love. She didn't say anything; neither did he for the moment. The tension between them was so acute that neither dared to utter a word for fear that something stupendous, something terrific should happen — a spiritual whirlwind perhaps that would whisk them both off the face of the earth. The spell only lasted a few seconds. All round them the world went on just the same. People laughed and gossiped and danced. They moved noisily up and down the corridor outside the box. Prolonged laughter coming from the direction of the buffet dispelled the last of the enchantment. A loud guffaw obviously came from Johnnie. Esther pulled herself together.

"Here's Johnnie," she said lightly. "He went to get me a drink. He will be so happy to see you."

Her quiet voice acted as a tonic on the man's aching nerves. He rose, readjusted the mask on his face and straightened out his tall figure. Esther, too, had risen and turned to the door. A few more seconds and they would pass out of one another's lives, these two who meant so much each to the other. Involuntarily the man spoke her name as if in a desperate attempt to retard this final parting:

"Esther!"

She shook her head and spoke as gently as a mother would to an obstinate child.

"It is no use, my dear," she said; "the past is past, and in a few weeks' time I shall be Miguel Alvalho's loyal wife. There is only one thing left for us both to do, and that is to forget."

He shook his head.

"We can't do that, Esther," he said, "you know we can't. You cannot forget the past any more than I can, nor can I ever shut you out of my life. What has been

has been, and while I am I and we are both alive, you will remain a part of me. If you are happy I shall know it. If you want me I shall be there."

And before Esther was aware of any movement on his part he had put one knee to the ground and raised her hand to his lips. The next moment she heard the door of the box open and shut and he was gone.

Johnnie came back a minute or two later, bringing her a cool drink; and while he handed her the glass and she took it from him he said casually:

"You have had a visitor."

She murmured: "Have I?"

"I saw a Pierrot slip out of here just as I came along. Who was it?"

"Oh, just Pierrot," she replied with a shrug.

ESTHER—LONDON, 1922

CHAPTER XIII

THERE followed that wonderful supper-party given to a few privileged guests by Sir Miguel Alvalho in his sumptuous mansion in Berkeley Square. It was spoken of, commented upon and paragraphed in the Society journals quite as fully as the ball had been. I can quite believe that it was wonderful, for Sir Miguel's entertainments were almost Oriental in their lavishness and hospitality. The choicest wines and most *recherché* dishes were there to tempt fastidious palates. The guests—they sat down forty at the table—were all intimate friends, so there was no stiffness, and conversation flowed as freely as did Cliquot 1914.

That Esther Curryer did not join in all the hilarity

was voted to be most natural and proper. She sat with the host at the head of the table looking very beautiful if rather abstracted, and turned now and then to her fiancé with a somewhat distract smile. Poor Esther had, as a matter of fact, not yet recovered her mental balance which the unexpected appearance of Nowell Ffoulkes had so completely put out of gear. When first she had resolved to sacrifice her innermost feelings at the altar of filial duty she had derived some consolation in the very thought of that sacrifice. Women who are intrinsically good and unselfish are apt to find a certain measure of happiness in self-immolation, very much like medieval saints and martyrs, who suffered self-imposed tortures thinking thereby to please the God of love and mercy. But for Miguel Alvalho's liberality, Lord Frederick Curryer would have had to stand his trial for fraud and what not, just like poor Lord Thurnham had done, and, like him, would certainly have been sent to prison. The disgrace almost more than the hardships of prison life would certainly have killed him, and the whole tragedy would not have hit him only, but also his children. Johnnie would have been ruined from a social and even a professional point of view: he would probably have been compelled to go abroad and start a new life somewhere in the Colonies. Esther's whole outlook on life did therefore appear both hopeless and sordid, when Miguel Alvalho suddenly appeared before her as a lover and a suitor for her hand. Her father broached the subject to her. Not in so many words did he say that on her acceptance depended the happy issue of all his troubles, but Esther was not a fool, and she guessed. There never was any question of a bargain: Miguel's wooing of her was most discreet and deferential, but obviously no man will hand over a fortune to a mere social acquaintance. He would to the father of his future wife.

Esther said "Yes" to Alvalho's ardent wooing, fully conscious that she was giving up thereby her long-cherished hopes of happiness as Nowell Ffoulkes's wife. She loved Nowell with all the strength of a loyal and

passionate nature, and his love for her had been a perfect wonder of tenderness and understanding, and an endless source of bliss to her ever since she emerged out of girlhood and became a sensitive woman. It was a heart-rending sacrifice, but she made it freely for Johnnie's sake, and from her deep sense of filial duty. She knew that she could never give her love to Miguel because the love of her life belonged to Nowell. But there is just this to be said. Long before the question of this marriage cropped up Nowell had gone away. He had been offered a highly lucrative post on Alvalho's sugar plantation in British Guiana. The post was certain to lead to better things. In five years' time at latest he would come back a rich man, justified in wooing the daughter of Lord Frederick Curryer. The crash only came two or three months later, and Lord Frederick was reputed to be still a rich man at the time. Esther—brought up in the lap of luxury, with a generous father and any amount of money at her disposal—could not be wooed honourably by a penniless journalist, for that was what Nowell was, and would have remained but for Alvalho's munificent offer. Womanlike, the girl resented her lover choosing what he called "the honourable part"—to make money and a home for his wife and not to court the rich girl openly until he had something to offer her besides his heart.

When the crash was imminent, Nowell was far away, so far away that his first letter had not yet reached her. When it did, she had already given her word to Miguel Alvalho. Sitting now at the head of his table Esther marvelled how she ever had the courage to do it. The glamour of the sacrifice had faded away since she had seen and talked to Nowell, and he with impassioned words had recalled the heavenly moment when she lay in his arms. There seemed to be no glory now in self-immolation, only misery and torture that would last and grow more unendurable day by day and year by year to the end of her life. And there was Nowell sitting not far from her. His glance avoided hers, but she had a

sort of feeling as if his soul had left his body and was hovering round her, reiterating those words which he had spoken in the box: "While I am I, and we are both alive, you will remain a part of me. If you are happy, I shall know it. If you want me, I shall be there."

At the other end of the table conversation was lively and general. Of course, the host and his beautiful fiancée were the only topics. There was Lady Cheeseman, reputed to be the most prolific disseminator of gossip in London, and also the most malicious. She was sitting next to old Colonel Stranleigh, as great a scoundrel as herself, and he had made some remark about the abstraction of this evening's heroine.

"She doesn't look happy, does she?" he added.

Lady Cheeseman was, of course, quite ready with an explanation likely to satisfy the curiosity of her friends.

"Happy?" she said. "Not likely. Esther Curryer is paying the price of that fortune which Sir Miguel gave to her father to keep him out of gaol."

"And," old Stranleigh concluded sententiously, "a man is entitled to get something for his money."

"It seems a heavy price to pay," one of the younger ladies remarked with a sigh.

"I don't know so much about that," Mrs. Burgoyne put in, speaking from the other side of the table. She had a pretty daughter who had "done" two London seasons and was still on the shelf. Mamma would gladly have seen her sitting to-night in Esther Curryer's place.

"I do," the younger lady insisted. "I could never have cared for Sir Miguel as a husband; he is too exotic for my taste."

"And these Orientals have a great contempt for us women." An elderly spinster said this, looking down her nose. But Mrs. Burgoyne at once protested:

"Oriental, my dear Miss Levett! Sir Miguel Alvalho is as English as you or I."

"With a name like that?" the maiden lady retorted with the soupçon of a sneer.

"The family is of Portuguese origin; we all know that."

"And until recently of the Jewish faith, shall we say?"

"I don't believe that," Mrs. Burgoyne rejoined. "I have been in Portugal, and the men there are very dark. And anyhow," she concluded, "the Portuguese Jews are the aristocracy of the race."

Miss Levett was apparently ready with a sharp retort, but the young man who sat next to her, feeling perhaps that the conversation was getting acrimonious, broke in with a genial exclamation:

"And aren't they clever, by Jove!"

"There are not many of us who would care for a clever husband," was Miss Levett's last retort: she was noted for always getting the last word in any discussion.

"I wouldn't, I know," a débutante agreed; and threw an adoring glance on her neighbour, who did not look as if he was overburdened with brains. "I like a man to be a good sportsman, and to look handsome as well as romantic. I can't think how Esther could look at Sir Miguel at all."

"Clever people take to one another," Mrs. Burgoyne declared, looking on her daughter who had "done" two seasons and was still on the shelf. "And there's no denying that Esther is remarkably clever."

"Clever enough, at any rate," was Lady Cheeseman's dry rejoinder, "to prefer Sir Miguel's millions to Nowell Ffoulkes's romantic penury."

"I suppose she was really in love with Nowell," sighed the romantic débutante.

"No doubt at all; but he hadn't a bean, and Miguel Alvalho is a millionaire ten times over."

"But Nowell is so handsome! At a cricket match, in his flannels, he is just adorable."

"He doesn't look very happy to-night, does he?"

"Can you wonder?" the colonel put in. "He must be going through hell if he really cared for the girl."

"I wonder he came, then."

"I don't know, Lady Cheeseman, why you should say that he doesn't look happy," another of the girls protested. "He is the life and soul of the party at that end of the table."

Lady Cheeseman's answer to that was something that sounded very like a sniff.

"Poor old Nowell!" she remarked; and put up her lorgnette to take a good look at him. "I remember seeing him just before he went abroad last year. It was at a fancy-dress ball which Sir Miguel Alvalho gave at Claridge's. Nowell Ffoulkes wore a lovely costume which they said was actually the one worn by his ancestor, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes at his wedding to the daughter of a French Count, Suzanne de Tournay."

It was Miss Levett's turn to sigh and to cast an appraising glance on Nowell Ffoulkes.

"Yes," she said, "that certainly was a romantic story, and, I believe, absolutely true. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes was Nowell's great-great-grandfather, and I have heard it said that he was an intimate friend of Sir Percy Blakeney, who was believed in his day to have been the Scarlet Pimpernel."

There were many "Oh's" and "Ah's" and similar ejaculations after this, and for a while the conversation at this end of the table was kept up in an ultra-romantic vein. At the other end sat the hero and heroine of this modern romance. Sir Miguel, who had his lovely fiancée by the side of him, presided at his own supper-table. He was full of delicate attentions towards his future wife, and was seen more than once during the evening to raise her hand surreptitiously to his lips. Everyone was, fortunately, too self-absorbed to notice that every time he did this a kind of shiver appeared to go through Esther Curryer's beautiful body, while every vestige of colour fled from her cheeks, and that she cast many a hurried and appealing glance on Nowell Ffoulkes,

who sat obliquely opposite to her. Those ladies were right who declared that he was the life and soul of the party. He certainly was that: he talked and laughed incessantly, was full of amusing stories about his travels and experiences in South America, and of cricket and golf jokes that were voted much funnier than any that appeared in *Punch*. Repeated ejaculations of "That's a good one!" and "Ffoulkes, you really are priceless!" all accompanied by loud guffaws, echoed from the top of the table down to the bottom. It was only old Lady Cheeseman who murmured partly to herself: "Poor old Nowell! You don't deceive me with that forced laughter and all that brainless talk." And his men friends remarked that the "priceless" fellow drank nothing but water.

It was generally conceded that both the future husband and the former lover behaved with admirable courtesy towards one another, and with perfect self-restraint. Sympathy was shown towards Sir Miguel for being, as it were, obliged to welcome Nowell Ffoulkes in his house; some of the ladies averred that he probably knew nothing of his fiancée's early love romance, but this was generally discredited as being most unlikely. Everyone in Society knew that Nowell was desperately in love with Esther Curryer, but as he was penniless and as many as three lives stood between him and the Ffoulkes title and property, the young people could not dream of the possibility of marriage for at least a decade.

An hour after midnight exactly Sir Miguel rose and, holding up his glass, called upon his guests to drink the health of his future wife. Esther raised her eyes to his then and genuinely tried to smile and to look happy. Everyone rose in response, and there was a general hubbub of murmured congratulations and clicking of glasses, while Esther's girl friends ran round the table in order to give her a kiss. General Hay Brudenel, who had been John Curryer's Commanding Officer, made

a felicitous if somewhat verbose speech, in the course of which he referred with expressions of regret to the absence of his old friend Frederick Curryer, who was too ill to be present on this auspicious occasion.

Cliquot 1914 flowed more freely than ever after that; but again it was remarked that though Ffoulkes was as gay as ever, he never as much as sipped a glass of champagne in response to Sir Miguel's toast.

It was not till the small hours of the morning that the party finally broke up. Alvalho drove his future bride and her brother back to their home in Egerton Crescent. Here the three of them parted at the front door. Esther gave her hand to her fiancé, who kissed the tips of her fingers, but made no attempt to embrace her. . . .

Back in her room, she sank into a comfortable chair, feeling tired and slightly hysterical. The self-control which she had imposed on herself during supper had frayed her nerves, and she felt inclined to cry. She had wanted to cry once or twice, whenever she encountered Nowell's eyes fixed upon her, and she had felt an almost uncontrollable longing to end the whole thing then and there, to jump to her feet and cry out to all those empty-headed, malicious women that she repudiated the abominable bargain that had been imposed on her by her father's criminal folly, and that she would regain her freedom even at the price of his disgrace. Whereupon there came thoughts of Johnnie and of all that the breaking of her word would mean for him, when his father's disgrace redounded on him, and all his hopes of making his way in the world became as the baseless fabric of a vision. And Esther then swallowed her tears, tried to smile and to look happy.

Now that she was alone there came the reaction. Self-control gave way: her exacerbated nerves worked their wicked will with her. The tears welled to her eyes, and she cried out in an outburst of real soul-agony:

“I can't go through with it! I can't!”

With Nowell back in England and loving her as much

as ever he did, and she loving him with all her heart and soul, how could she pledge her troth to another man?

But oh, the inevitableness of it all! Just her heart pulling one way and everything else—duty, honour, pride—pulling the other. Thankful that she was alone, Esther indulged in a real big cry, which left her exhausted physically, but mentally slightly more at peace.

The door was pushed open gently. Johnnie, seeing that the light was up, came tiptoeing in.

"Not in bed yet, Esther?" he said; then came quickly up to her, for he saw that she had been crying. He knelt down beside her and put his arms round her.

"I can't bear this, Esther," he said resolutely. "I can't bear to see you so unhappy. What is it? I wish you would tell me."

She dried her tears hastily and gave him a reassuring smile.

"There's nothing to tell, Johnnie," she said.

"You have been crying," he insisted, "as if you were thoroughly miserable. Alvalho isn't so hateful to you as all that, is he?"

Still smiling she shook her head.

"I only cried because I was very tired—too tired, even, to go to bed."

"H'm," Johnnie murmured dubiously. "I wish, though, that Ffoulkes had stayed with his niggers out there. I believe it was his being here that upset you."

"And now you are talking nonsense, Johnnie."

She paused a moment, then went on casually: "By the way, did aunt telephone about father?"

"Yes; Spinks took the message. Father has had a good day. His cough is ever so much better, and his lumbago has quite gone. The doctor says he can get up to-morrow."

"That's good news, anyway," Esther concluded quite cheerfully. "Now run away, Johnnie, for I am really very tired, and it's nearly three o'clock in the morning, you know. Good night, dear."

She rose and held out her cheek for his kiss.
“I’ll go at once,” he said, “if you will promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“That before you settle down for what is left of the night you will just think of old Miguel as the good-hearted, generous fellow he is. Don’t think of his faults, only of his many, many good qualities. Will you promise?”

He had spoken with unusual earnestness. She sighed a little, then smiled up at his eager, anxious face.

“I’ll do my best, Johnnie,” she said.

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BOOK III

JOHNNIE



Disguised as a moujik, dirty, unkempt. . . .

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JOHN CURRYER lay awake during most of those weary morning hours. Thinking. Planning. Cogitating. Haunted by visions of his darling sister's face, hot and swollen by tears. He cursed himself for a miserable fool. Stupid and incompetent. What had he done since the crash came? He had, of course, gone through a terribly hard time, heart-rending, nerve-racking, while he was kept out of his father's confidence. Retrenchment from a life of luxury to one of comparative simplicity became, step by step, the order of the day. Monksfield was up for sale, the mansion in Grosvenor Square was given up, together with racing stables, yacht and shooting-box in Scotland; but he and Esther were kept in the dark as to the cause of all this change. And it was not until rumours of the impending catastrophe reached their ears from the outside that they gradually came to realise the depth of the abyss into which their father was plunging headlong, dragging his children down to the depths with him.

Nor did either of them know anything at first of Sir Miguel Alvalho's intervention in this terrible cataclysm. It was only his courting of Esther and their father's urgent advocacy of the marriage that caused the truth to dawn upon them both. Even then Esther demurred. Her heart was given to Nowell Ffoulkes: her troth was plighted to him. But alas! he was far away and could not plead his own cause. In the end her resistance weakened and she was ready for the sacrifice.

As for Johnnie, he swore from the first that he,

personally, would not be beholden to any man. He had originally been in the Coldstreams, and took up flying during the War. At Esther's earnest request he gave up flying and rejoined his regiment. But to stay in it was now out of the question. He thought, at first, of exchanging into one where he could live on his pay; but that would mean long periods away from Esther, who was lonely and not very happy with a fretful and irritable father, who had taken misfortune badly. At her special request her marriage had been put off until the late spring, and Johnnie didn't want to be ordered abroad until he had seen her settled in her new home, and was satisfied that she would be, if not happy at first, at any rate contented. He had a vague idea that as Lady Alvalho she might be a little lonely. Sir Miguel was a very busy man: he seemed to have business ramifications all over the world, and what's more, he was often absent for weeks on end, even during the early days of his courtship.

Anyway, Johnnie decided that he must try and get some sort of lucrative job, if not actually in England at any rate one that would not take him away from home for too long a time. Of course, Sir Miguel anticipated this wish of his future brother-in-law. He always seemed to know things by intuition, and was ready with offers of a post for Johnnie in one of his numerous financial undertakings. But Johnnie would have none of that. He liked Miguel and admired him for his splendid qualities and his generosity, but he was not in the mood just then to accept further obligations from him, or from anyone for a matter of that.

As a boy he had always been very fond of writing, and had once won a prize in a children's literary competition offered by one of the big popular newspapers. During the War, when he was home on leave or convalescent in hospital, he had beguiled weariness by jotting down reminiscences and anecdotes of his experiences without any thought of ever seeing them in print. But when trouble came into the house, when

money became tight at home, when Johnnie found himself on the verge of becoming a derelict in Society, his thoughts reverted to those bits of scribbling he had indulged in, and he put these reminiscences together, titled them "A Flying Man at Large," and sent them in to the Empire Press, one of the most influential and most widely known newspaper organisations in the world. To his astonishment and delight his short articles were accepted by the *Evening Post* for serial publication, and paid for on the nail. They were well told and racy.

In prosperous days he used to call his writing "aberrations of the intellect," but this particular aberration proved to be quite rational and lucrative; for, following this initial success, he obtained regular work on the various periodicals published by the same firm who had given him his first chance; and Johnnie soon saw the likelihood of deriving a comfortable little income from journalism. But, of course, this did not mean a fortune: nothing wherewith to rescue his father from the consequences of his criminal folly, or to allow Esther to turn her back on a loveless marriage and to seek happiness with the man of her choice.

Now John Curryer was nothing if not mercurial. Unlike his father, he rebounded under the blows of misfortune. His was essentially a resilient nature, and that night when he had seen his dearly loved sister in tears, when he understood without a doubt the full extent of her heartache, he wove plans in his head which if only half successful would enable him to—what? He didn't go so far as to answer that question. Was he going to pay Miguel Alvalho back the thousands he had lent his father? It was nonsense, of course, but such was Johnnie's nature. Nothing ever seemed impossible to him. Not even that.

"I have got it in me," he said to himself during those wakeful hours of the morning. "I know I can do something big if only I am given the chance." He thought of the Harmsworths and the Newnes and the

Pearsons. Those men had started in a small way as simple journalists, and look at them now! Talk about paying out some thousands of pounds! A million wouldn't worry them—much.

And all this went round and round through Johnnie Curryer's head when he made his way down to Fleet Street the very next day. He had got out of bed, after a miserable night, with the firm resolve to seize Fortune by the forelock and not to let go till he got what he wanted. He was going to the gorgeous offices of the Empire Press. He was going to interview Lord Ralstane himself, the head of that stupendous organisation. And no one was going to stop him, either.

"I have worked for him for more than a year," he kept on repeating to himself, "and for next to nothing. It is time he did something really big for me now."

It was all very well, however, to make up one's mind that one was going straight to the fountain head—to the chief of the Empire Press himself, but things didn't go quite as easily as all that. Johnnie, who was always immaculately dressed and carried himself with an air as though the whole place belonged to him, swaggered in through the great portals of the palatial building. All the men in the outer and inner hall knew Mr. Curryer and liked him; they all touched their caps in response to Johnnie's amiable "Good morning." The trouble came when, in the inner hall, Johnnie demanded that his card be taken up to Lord Ralstane immediately, and at once he encountered the first barrage in the person of a large and important-looking commissionaire, who never as much as looked at the card, and only said in a lofty tone:

"Sorry, sir, but his Lordship never sees visitors except by appointment."

Johnnie, however, was not in a mood to be denied, and said so in forcible language, and with such an air of authority that the bewildered commissionaire summoned

another barrage in the person of a supercilious clerk, who queried loftily if Mr. Curryer had an appointment with his Lordship.

"No, I have not," Johnnie replied equally loftily. "But you are going to take my card up to his Lordship now, at once, or you will find yourself in Queer Street, my friend."

A third barrage was then produced, this time in the person of the assistant secretary's private secretary; and a fourth in that of the assistant secretary himself, who referred the matter to the secretary of his Lordship's own private secretary. But Johnnie refused to take "No" for an answer. He talked and he argued, and would not budge until his Lordship's own private secretary happened to come through the hall where the argument, not to say altercation, was going on. This exalted personage happened to know John Curryer personally. The engagement of Esther Curryer to Sir Miguel Alvalho had apparently impressed him by its social importance, for he condescended to take the visitor's card, and with it retired to some inner sanctum far away. He was gone some time, for half a mile and more of corridors divided this holy of holies from the haunts of the vulgar. But he did return presently with the amazing announcement that his Lordship would see Mr. John Curryer in half an hour, whereupon there was great commotion among the secretaries and their assistants, and the lady typists cast inquisitorial glances on the man so signally favoured. When they discovered that the favoured one was good to look at, wistful sighs were superadded to the quizzing glances.

Johnnie, indifferent to sighs and glances, tried to possess his soul in patience. The half-hour spread itself out to an hour and a half, during which he was driven to cooling his heels by striding up and down the lengthy corridors. At last the welcome summons came, and he was presently ushered into the presence of the high-and-mighty boss of this world-renowned undertaking. His Lordship was sitting at his desk, busy

signing a number of letters which his private secretary had placed before him. He did not as much as look up when his persistent visitor entered the room. But Johnnie, having arrived thus far, was not going to lose his patience; he stood by quite quietly, waiting for the moment when the great man would condescend to be aware of his presence.

This happened after another ten minutes had gone by. The private secretary picked up the letters and retired, and John Curryer found himself alone under the quizzical glance of Lord Ralstane.

The glance was neither disapproving nor impatient, and after a moment or two the great man queried pleasantly:

"Sit down, Curryer, and tell me what I can do for you."

"You can do a great deal for me, sir," Johnnie replied bluntly, and took the chair which was indicated to him, "and you know as well as I do that what I am going to ask for I have well deserved."

"That's blunt, anyhow," the great man retorted with an indulgent smile. "Well, what is it?" he continued, as Johnnie had remained silent, looking both anxious and eager. "Anything about the coming marriage of Miss Curryer?"

"No, nothing to do with that."

"I am sorry. It is an interesting social event, and a paragraph from you . . . or even a short article—"

"That's just it, sir!" Johnnie broke in excitedly. "I am tired of writing Society paragraphs and short articles. I want work. Real big work, not all that futile nonsense about Lady Snooks and Sir Something Nothing, which makes me sick. I have got good big work in me. I can do it if you'll give me the chance. I have worked for you going on for twelve months, and I have got nowhere. Try me out with something really important. If I fail, or if I don't come up to your expectations, then kick me out and I'll try to get a job elsewhere; but in God's name give me a chance."

He looked so young, so handsome and above all so eager that the heart of the callous, case-hardened business man warmed to him as it had done in the past to his son, the equally eager and handsome boy who lay in an unknown grave somewhere in Flanders. He passed his hand across his eyes and forehead, smothered a sigh, and rejoined after a while:

"I am afraid there is nothing really big going on in England just now: I mean nothing that would suit your special style."

"But I'm not tied to England," Johnnie retorted. "My sister will be getting married: she won't want me any more, and she was my strongest tie. I would much rather go abroad."

"That would be difficult unless you are a good linguist."

"But I am a fairly good linguist, sir, if I may say so. I speak French almost as well as I do English, and Russian rather better."

Lord Ralstane, who since the beginning of the interview had been lolling back in his chair, sat up straight all of a sudden and looked Johnnie squarely between the eyes.

"Russian?" he said, speaking almost as eagerly as Curryer. "How is it you speak Russian at all?"

"My mother was Russian," Johnnie remarked simply.

"I didn't know that."

"She was Countess Andrieff. She died when Esther and I were schoolchildren."

"And you speak the language fluently?"

"Like a native, really. My mother always spoke Russian with us children, and I kept it up during the War with the many Russian staff officers who were often over here. My sister speaks it just as well as I do."

"And have you any relatives still living out there?"

"I had, sir," Johnnie replied dubiously. "Uncles and aunts and cousins galore! But that was before the revolution. My sister and I have had no news of any of

them for the past five years. We used to get letters during the War, but not since; and of course I haven't any idea how things are over there."

"Who corresponded with you during the War?"

"My aunt and her two daughters. Esther and I were very much attached to them. We once stayed with them for a whole year when we were children."

"Where do they live? I mean, in what part of Russia?"

"They have a huge estate. The name is Ufelgrad. It is right in the east of Russia at the foot of the Urals. Wonderful country, sir. Gorgeous river and mountain scenery, and of course marvellous shooting and fishing. We children loved it."

And suddenly the great man exclaimed:

"But, my boy, do you know that all that you tell me is positively wonderful?"

Johnnie opened wide his eyes.

"Wonderful?" he queried. "Why, sir?"

"Because we have been for weeks on the look-out for a man whom we could send to Russia on a very important mission, and that, very obviously, you are the man we want."

Johnnie's only comment on this was a breathless "By gosh!"

The great man now pressed the button of the electric bell on his bureau.

"Ask Mr. Harman to come along," he said to the uniformed man who came for orders.

Johnnie was speechless. The position had all of a sudden become almost miraculous. He knew Mr. Harman by name and by sight. He was the editor of the *New Era*, probably the most influential, as it certainly is the widest read paper in the world.

Mr. Harman was middle-aged, pompous and slightly bald. He had a slight stoop as if the weight of his responsibility as chief editor of the most influential paper in the world weighed too heavily upon him. He wore glasses. An old-fashioned Albert chain to which a

spade guinea was attached was displayed across his waistcoat.

"Sit down, please, Mr. Harman," his chief said curtly; "here is news for you."

Mr. Harman would have looked sceptical had he dared. He did not condescend to look at Johnnie. Here was more "stuff," probably about that ridiculous fancy-dress ball and that equally ridiculous engagement. He was sick of them both, having refused no fewer than two hundred and forty-nine articles dealing with those two events during the course of the morning; all written by amateurs and of no use whatsoever. Curryer was not an amateur, but it was his sister who had got engaged, and his account of the ball and the supper-party was sure to be fulsome and quite unsuitable to the highbrow policy of the *New Era*. He wondered why the chief had sent for him rather than for Mumford of the *Ladies' Own*, who liked that sort of "stuff." These thoughts flashed through Mr. Harman's mind. They came and went in the space of a few seconds, and at once gave way to positive stupefaction when he realised that his Lordship was laughing, yes! positively laughing at him.

"You are priceless, Harman," he deigned to say. "I know just what is going on in your mind. You have got last night's social event positively on the brain. But I did not send for you in order to discuss it. I have something far more important to tell you."

Mr. Harman at once looked deferentially attentive.

"Mr. Curryer here," the great man continued, "who has worked for us for some time and whom you must have interviewed time out of count, speaks Russian like a native."

He paused a moment, then added with just a shade of irony: "You didn't know that, did you?"

Mr. Harman shivered. Did his ears deceive him or had he detected a slight suggestion of reproof in the chief's tone of voice? And all because of this young whipper-snapper who happened to speak Russian. Reproof or not, however, he thought it wise to keep a

discreet silence whilst waiting for further pronouncement from the redoubtable chief.

"Mr. Curryer's mother was a Russian, he tells me, and he has relatives still living—presumably, that is—in Russia," the great man went on. "It is a pity you didn't know all this. We wouldn't have wasted weeks in trying to find someone suitable to send out there." He then turned to Johnnie, leaving Mr. Harman still shivering and silent.

"The matter is this, Curryer," he began, speaking directly to Johnnie. "There are persistent rumours, emanating from various parts of Russia, that when those brutes over there massacred the entire Russian Imperial family, the Tsar himself escaped death through what apparently was a miracle."

"Great Lord!" Johnnie murmured, and Mr. Harman forgot to shiver, and also murmured, but in an altogether different spirit: "Great Lord!"

"These rumours," the chief continued, "may, of course, be false, and what we want is reliable and detailed information from a trustworthy source. Is the Tsar alive? Did he suffer from shock and loss of memory? And has he been living under the care of a loyal friend who has nursed him back to health? That, in point of fact, is the story. But Harman here has declared all along that the whole thing is nothing but gammon. I needn't remind you of the many cases of the same sort: of the several pretenders, for instance, who tried to prove that they were really and truly the Dauphin, son of Louis XVI, supposed to have died in prison, but miraculously rescued, and who actually laid claim to the throne of France. And in our own day there were plenty of dupes who asserted that Kitchener was alive and a prisoner in Germany, and that they had actually seen and spoken to him. Well, putting all that rubbish aside, we want to know just what truth there is in this new story. It is said that the Tsar has been touring around Eastern Russia, chiefly in the provinces of Samara, Oldenburg and Ufa, testing the loyalty of the people,

and that he has found immense enthusiasm among the peasantry there, also among the Cossacks of the Ural and the more or less nomadic tribes that wander in the regions of the steppes. All that, of course, means very little even if it is all true. That class in Russia is very ignorant and entirely illiterate. I doubt if there is a single one among them who has ever seen the Tsar in the flesh. But they all have pictures of him in their cottages and, impostor or not, this man, whoever he is, has, according to all accounts, aroused the loyalty and the worship which they used to accord to the Little Father in the past."

Lord Ralstane had spoken at great length, a thing he very seldom did, as both his interlocutors well knew. They hung almost breathless on his lips, for he spoke, if not exactly with conviction, at any rate with great earnestness. The subject evidently interested him. He had thought about it for weeks, and his big brain had formulated plans and schemes which would, if successful, redound to the prestige of his stupendous business. During the slight pause that ensued, he picked some papers out of the drawer of his bureau and handed them over to Mr. Harman, who glanced at them, nodded sagely and put them down again.

"That's it, isn't it, Harman?" the chief queried.
"Yes, sir."

"You are prepared to abide by it, as we arranged?"
"Of course, sir," was the emphatic reply.

And once more the chief turned fully to Johnnie, who had sat by, speechless, wondering if this was all a dream, for he foresaw that something that was very good indeed was coming his way through this amazing story of a resuscitated Tsar.

"I dare say you have guessed by now," his Lordship resumed, "what share I am prepared to assign to you in one of the biggest undertakings ever embarked on by the *New Era*, for if Tsar Nikolas II is really alive, all the resources of my company will be placed at his disposal, and we will bear every expense required for

bringing about his restoration to the throne. We will strangle Moscow and all it stands for, once and for all, and earn the gratitude of the whole of Europe by wiping the entire Bolshevik organisation off the face of the earth. A noble ambition, what?"

"It is, sir, it is!" Johnnie cried enthusiastically.

"And one that will make you proud to be associated with it?"

"By gosh, it will!"

"And you are prepared to leave for Russia immediately?"

"To-night if you wish, sir."

"That's good. Now listen; if you get in touch with the Tsar, the real Tsar, and bring us authentic information not only about him personally, but about the likelihood of a general rising of the peasantry, the Cossacks and the tribes on his behalf, there will be five thousand pounds for you, and another five thousand if the counter-revolution is successful. I need hardly tell you that if it is, the Tsar himself will more than double those amounts."

Johnnie's eyes nearly fell out of his head. This was something that went beyond his wildest dreams. Five thousand! . . . More than doubled! . . . Trebled!

Quadrupled! He would be rich . . . rich! And Esther need not marry Miguel Alvalho, for he, Johnnie, would pay all his father's debts. He was just sane enough for the moment to realise that the materialisation of all these golden dreams was still rather problematical, and in any case only belonged to the future and not to the present. But the prospect was alluring. The very fact of being sent out by the *New Era* on such a momentous mission would be a tremendous asset in his career. Even if he did not succeed in making a fortune out of this expedition to Eastern Russia, it would mean a great deal of prestige for him in the newspaper world, and with it an independent income; and above all it would be a marvellous experience which would stand him in good stead for the rest of

his life. He might not become rich enough to pay his father's debts to Alvalho and free Esther from an undesired marriage, but he would certainly be spared the humiliation of being in any way dependent on her and her husband.

While all these thoughts went flashing through Johnnie's mind, the chief carried on a whispered conversation with Mr. Harman. A word from the great man brought him back to earth.

"You will have to start the day after to-morrow," his Lordship said. "You can do that, of course," he added, more as a statement of fact than a query. Johnnie said "Yes!" And the other continued:

"We will give you a thousand pounds for your immediate expenses, and for every letter which we receive from you we will place two hundred pounds to your credit at any bank you like to name. These sums will be over and above your final remuneration of five thousand pounds."

He paused a moment as if waiting for this pronouncement to sink into Johnnie's head. Then he went on, speaking very slowly and emphasising every word:

"Now, about your letters. These, if sent by ordinary channels, would, of course, be either censored or actually suppressed. But we have other means at our disposal for keeping in touch with you. There is a cargo boat, flying the Greek flag, which plies between Enzeli on the north coast of Persia, and Astrakhan, calling also at Baku on the way. She calls about four times a year at Astrakhan, takes on furs and delivers woollen stuffs and carpets, and you will have to arrange to be at Astrakhan whenever she calls there. The skipper, who is a Greek, has done business for us before now and is in our pay. His name is Nikotis and his ship is the *Ambrosios*. Her next date for calling in Astrakhan is April 30th. You will see Nikotis, and you can hand over to him any letters or parcels you wish to send to us, and he will hand you over any message we may desire to send to you.

You have only to mention my name. We will communicate with him in the meanwhile so that he will expect you. He is in constant touch with a special agent of ours in Teheran, so if you are short of money you need only to ask Nikotis and he will give you what you want."

Once more the great man paused. After a time he queried:

"Now, have I made everything clear?"

"Quite clear, sir," Johnnie replied. "And the day after to-morrow I start for——?" He broke off, looking enquiringly at his chief.

"For Moscow, of course," the latter replied. "You shall have your passport and all necessary papers by to-morrow midday. By the way, what is your aunt's name?"

"Princess Rabrinski, sir. But I don't suppose she is allowed to use her title now."

"Husband living?"

"No, sir. Killed in the War."

"Tell me the name of her estate again, will you?"

"Ufelgrad, sir, on the river Ufa."

"Got all that down, Harman?" the chief asked. Mr. Harman nodded, and Ralstane turned once more to Curryer:

"You will travel via Ostend and Berlin," he said. "On your passport you will be described as cinema producer travelling to Moscow with a view to arranging for the production of Russian films of outstanding merit, on the Continent of Europe and in America. You will present yourself at the British Legation directly you arrive; I will give you a letter of introduction to a personal friend of mine who is on the staff, and who will do all that is necessary to facilitate your departure from Moscow and your visits to various towns in Eastern Russia, in Transcaucasia and over the frontier in Siberia. Outside that, of course, you will have to use your wits and look after yourself. I think," Lord Ralstane concluded, and cast a kindly and appreciative

glance on John Curryer, "I think that you are the right man for the job. And if you are satisfied with your prospects and are willing to take certain risks in this adventure, you will never have cause to regret it."

Johnnie was being dismissed. He rose, feeling more than ever that he was living in a dream. The way this man talked of thousands of pounds, of crushing Bolshevik Russia, and setting the Tsar back on his throne did not seem to belong to a world of reality. It was fantastic, chimerical, Utopian, certainly not of the earth, earthy. But it was jolly fine all the same, and Johnnie quite agreed with the chief that he, John Curryer, was the man to lay the foundations of this immense undertaking.

There was only one thing more to do, or rather two things. One was to try and say the right word to the man who was putting his trust in him and giving him this wonderful chance in life. Johnnie did try and say that word, but somehow his throat felt tight. He couldn't say anything. For the first time in his life emotion had completely got the better of him. But the other understood. He was a great man, truly great in that he understood human nature. It was like an open book to him. He knew that Johnnie was grateful, guessed what he meant to say and appreciated the boy's emotion and inability to speak. He held out a kindly, warm hand, which Johnnie grasped with genuine fervour.

"Remember," he said in the end, "that above all we trust to your discretion. I don't mean, of course, while you are out there, for that goes without saying; but also during the forty-eight hours that you will have to spend in England before you start. What are you doing to-night?"

"Nothing, sir. My sister and I were, anyhow, going to spend a quiet evening together."

"You mean the future Lady Alvalho."

"Yes. She is the only person in the world I would

like, with your permission, sir, to know where I am going, and with what object."

"She is discreet?"

"The most discreet woman and the best sister God has ever put on the map. There's no one else really that I care about or who cares about me."

"Then by all means report to her everything that has passed between us. Tell her that directly we get a letter from you we will let her know, and of course you can always include a letter for her in your postal packet to us. It will be better than writing to her direct. Now, I really think that is all," the chief concluded with a final nod of dismissal.

Mr. Harman gave Johnnie a sign and the boy followed him out of the room, feeling tongue-tied and stupid, but very happy and immensely grateful.

The next thing which had to be done was very pleasant indeed. Mr. Harman conducted Johnnie to the cashier's office, where he received the sum of £1,000 in Bank of England notes. He smothered a "Whoopee!" which threatened to burst out of his constricted throat then and there, but he delivered himself of it as soon as he was out in the street. He had never held a thousand pounds in his two hands before.

And now to tell Esther all about it. ✓

man whom he was sending out on what was certainly a dangerous errand. Johnnie was to travel, not as a newspaper correspondent, but as the representative of an American motion-picture concern. As luck, or perhaps Lord Ralstane's designs would have it, Sir Watson James—attached to the British Legation at Moscow—was returning to duty about this time. Nothing more simple, therefore, than that the two men should travel out together. Sir Watson, be it said, was a personal friend of Ralstane, which made matters still more easy to arrange. His diplomatic passport threw a sort of glamour over Johnnie's commercial one, and at the frontier, contrary to expectations, the Russian officials were quite amiable and even helpful.

Sir Watson was an agreeable travelling companion. He had been very nearly all over the world, had spent a considerable time in the Near East and a good many years in Russia. Lord Ralstane had given him a hint of what Curryer's errand really was, and he was able to give the younger man some good advice as to the best way of approaching the new revolutionary Government under the pretext of motion-picture production.

"The men at the head of affairs," he remarked, "are quite amenable to the suggestion of propaganda. They are a very young organization, of course, and as arrogant and self-satisfied as you like. At the same time there is no doubt, at any rate in my mind, that they feel the ostracism to which Europe is subjecting them, so I don't think that you will find any difficulty in ingratiating yourself with them. They want to stand well with the Western world. . . ."

"You think so?" Johnnie put in. "I thought they despised us all as capitalists and I don't know what."

"So they do in their own bombastic way. But whenever I have come in personal contact with some of those fellows, I have always found that they try to get round one, not exactly to justify their actions, but to place themselves and their abominable doings in a good light. They are very fond of talking about their ideals,

and taunt us foreigners with never having known anything of the seamy side of Russian life under the Tsarist *régime*—oppression of the peasants by the landed class, tyranny of the officials and overbearing ways of the aristocracy.”

“Did you ever meet this man Vladimir Lenin, sir?” Johnnie asked. “He is the coming man, isn’t he?”

“Not only the coming man, my dear fellow,” Sir Watson replied. “He is the man of the hour. I shouldn’t be surprised if those wretched people made a sort of idol of him and put his effigy up in their cottages as they did that of that wretched Tsar. The murder of the Imperial family, of that poor Tsarina, and all those children, was the most appalling tragedy of modern times. I can’t help wishing, as many others do also, that we, in England, had done something to prevent it. I am always ashamed when I meet a White Russian and he takes the opportunity to remind me that his Emperor was first cousin to our King.”

“How do you feel yourself, sir,” Johnnie hazarded, “about those rumours that the ex-Tsar is still alive?”

“Frankly I don’t believe in them,” Sir Watson replied decisively. “I know that Ralstane does, and I quite see the wisdom of sending you, who are half Russian, out there in order to get to the bottom of the whole thing. But,” he went on with a dubious shake of the head, “I am afraid you are in for a disappointment both for yourself and for him.”

“Oh! I don’t care for myself,” John Curryer rejoined airily. “Anyway, I shall gain a tremendous lot of experience which I can always make use of in journalism. It will all be very exciting and altogether new as far as I am concerned. As for Lord Ralstane, he has so many irons in the fire that if one of them comes to nothing I don’t suppose he would care very much.”

“I don’t know,” the other mused. “Ralstane’s brain, which we all know is very big, is so filled with hatred of all this Bolshevism that it almost amounts to a mania. I am sure he has set his heart on your success.

Mind you, Nikolas II would save Europe if he were alive."

"Lord Ralstane believes that the whole of Eastern Russia is still loyal," Johnnie observed. "Do you think so too, sir?"

"I don't know what to think," Sir Watson rejoined. "Of course, if it is, and if the Cossacks of the Don will stay by him, he may yet succeed in gathering such a powerful army round him as would send all those pestilential Bolsheviks back to their underground lairs."

Curryer couldn't help smiling at the vehemence which the staid and sober diplomat exhibited every time the subject of Bolshevism came on the *tapis*.

"You do hate those fellows, don't you, sir?" he put in lightly. And as Sir Watson made no reply he went on more seriously:

"I think most of us in England are wishing that the ex-Tsar were alive, and that he would very soon, as you say, send Bolshevism and all its adepts to—— where they came from."

"He would have to be pretty quick about it," Sir Watson concluded. "My own belief is that in a couple of years Bolshevism will be so firmly implanted in this country that nothing on earth will ever dislodge it again, and then Heaven help the rest of Europe!"

John Curryer was well provided with such papers and books as would furnish inquisitive officials with proof that he was really and truly in the employ of a motion-picture company and interested in the production of original films by Russian organizations. He was not supposed to be an operator, and so was not encumbered with cumbersome cameras and so forth. He had one pocket camera of the most perfect type furnished with a super-Zeiss lens, which would give him everything he wanted should an occasion to use it arise.

In order to give further verisimilitude to his assumed role, he had gone to the length of concocting a couple of scenarios which he hoped would establish him in the

eyes of the powers that be as a useful propagandist for the dissemination throughout the world of their much-vaunted "ideals." The scenarios dealt with heroic families of workers who lived under appallingly sordid conditions under the Tsarist *régime*. There were scenes of unspeakable brutality, perpetrated by capitalists and aristocrats and others, in which the workers were shown to be triumphant and the wicked aristocrats were seen grovelling at the feet of their former servants, who magnanimously granted them their lives.

Thanks to Sir Watson James's kindly intervention, copies of these scenarios passing from hand to hand, came finally under the notice of the Chief Commissar for Propaganda, who sent for "Comrade Curryer" and in a short interview expressed to him his approval of the line he had taken with reference to collecting material for the production of this important branch of cinematographic art—propaganda.

The goodwill of this Chief Commissar procured for John Curryer the same goodwill on the part of the Chief Commissar for Transport, with the result that within a fortnight of his arrival in Moscow the representative of the American motion-picture company found himself in possession of the travelling permit which he had asked for, namely one to cover the South-Eastern provinces between Samara and Astrakhan. He had explained to the Chief Commissar for Transport that this region would provide him with all the necessary background for his story. He would also be able to study there the manners and customs of the people and witness the folk-dances for which the country had always been justly famous.

All of which was, of course, entirely simple and plausible, and John was allowed to start on his way. At first he had thought of going to Ufelgrad and getting in touch with his relations there, but on the strongly worded advice of Sir Watson James he gave up the idea.

"They wouldn't be able to do anything for you," was what Sir Watson said. "I knew Prince Rabrinski

very well and his charming wife and daughters, but I also happen to know that the Princess is rather in bad odour with the Bolsheviks, as indeed all cultured and well-born people are. I can't help thinking that you would be running into quite unnecessary danger by going to see them, and what's more—should they happen to know anything about the ex-Tsar—you would be endangering their safety also. My advice to you is: stick to your cinema business for the present. If all goes well, you'll have plenty of opportunity to see your relations later."

John Curryer left Moscow the day after he received the welcome permits. These were the very worst days of travelling in every part of Russia. The journey from the frontier to Moscow had been endurable and no more, but on these less frequented railway tracks the discomforts that befell the unfortunate traveller were beyond description. Johnnie experienced them all: hopeless unpunctuality, delays without end, dirt, smells, indiscriminate propinquity, were some of the minor evils of this long, wearisome journey. But he didn't care. His mind was far too deeply engrossed in thinking of the exciting adventure which lay before him for his body to feel either hunger, thirst or fatigue. Secure in the knowledge that he spoke Russian like a native, what he intended to do was to keep up his role of representative of an American cinematograph company only in the cities, and when it came to plunging into the heart of the country, to assume the disguise of a peddling *moujik*, going from house to house, and selling such miscellaneous goods as he would find to buy on the way, and incidentally gathering what information he could on the subject nearest his heart. Already while he was in Moscow he had let his hair and beard grow, and had collected such articles of old clothing as would serve him in his proposed disguise. Sir Watson James, who saw him in the morning before he left, and for whose benefit Johnnie had dressed himself up to look as like a poor *moujik* as he could, pronounced the disguise to be excellent.

"But don't forget," he admonished Johnnie with a laugh, "that a *moujik* doesn't wash his feet any more than he does his face, and has never had a bath in his life."

"I know," Johnnie retorted ruefully. "I'll be an unwashed *moujik* from top to toe, I promise you."

"And never forget," Sir Watson warned him further, "that the country is absolutely riddled with spies, and that they are just as ready to assume a disguise as you are. Never speak to a man within earshot of another. Trust no one, not even a child."

Sir Watson spoke with deep earnestness. Johnnie, who a moment ago had been all excitement and enthusiasm, felt all of a sudden unusually subdued.

"You are very kind, sir," he said simply, "to take such an interest in me. May I give you my word that I will do nothing to forfeit the trust which Lord Ralstane has placed in me. I know that what I have undertaken is a very difficult business, but somehow I feel that I am going to be successful. It is such a wonderful adventure," he concluded with a sigh. "I am just longing to be on the way."

JOHN CURRYER by dint of determination and perseverance, by travelling first to Samara and thence to Oldenburg and Astrakhan, by journeying in jolting *tarantass* over mountain passes, across the steppes and along the shores of the Volga, had gradually gathered a great deal of valuable information. He learned that the ex-Tsar was, according to the firm belief of every man and woman he met, very much alive: he had been seen by hundreds and

thousands of peasants, workers and tribesmen while he traversed the provinces which lie between the Volga and the Urals, and the territories on the farther side of the Gates of Asia.

There appeared to be no doubt whatever that he had been received everywhere with the greatest enthusiasm, and that he had succeeded during his travels in gathering round him an army of followers, which consisted partly of untrained bands of peasants and workers, partly of nomadic tribesmen, and partly, also, of some divisions of the old irregular troops that had remained faithful to the old *régime*: Cossacks, for the most part, of the Ural and the Don, with their Hetmans and officers.

The population of South-Eastern Russia is largely composed of nomadic tribes, and the Moscow Government had granted administrative autonomy to the various allied Socialist Republics, such as the Ukraine, Turkestan and Crimea as well as to the territories and communes of the Kalmucks, the Kirghiz, the Tcherkes and others. This arrangement, be it said, was not destined to last: the giant octopus up in Moscow soon spread its tentacles over these comparatively free territories and the tyranny of bureaucracy from headquarters soon took the place of so-called independent local administration. Already there was an attempt to bring the provinces into line by establishing local administrations under direct orders from Moscow in all the bigger towns, especially in those that bordered on the railway. This was with a view to rounding up the nomads for military purposes and keeping a control over their movements by issuing permits without which travelling by rail was not allowed. These administrations were gradually backed up by military and political police, which in the years that were to come helped to establish the tyranny of the Soviets over the former independent republics.

But this was not yet. During John Curryer's mission in South-Eastern Russia, peasants and workers, as well as wandering tribes, could come and go as they pleased,

anywhere except on the railway, where a permit was necessary but seldom refused.

It is generally conceded by students of facts and events that in adventures such as the one in which John Curryer had taken a headlong plunge, Chance sometimes steps in and plays a leading role.

And this is what happened to Johnnie. Disguised as a *moujik*, dirty, unkempt, unwashed, wrapped up rather than clad in miscellaneous bits of clothing, but with visions of thousands of pounds, the foundation of a fortune, floating pleasantly before his eyes, he had traversed a good deal of the country which lies between the Volga and the Gates of Asia, following up a clue here and there, which often proved elusive and nearly always futile. But he had pursued his wanderings, nevertheless, with a brave heart and unwavering hope, sometimes on foot, sometimes in a jolting *tarantass*, once for a dozen hours in one of those abominable Russian trains, and once even for a considerable time in a ramshackle Packard car, which he picked up in an outlying small township and whose owner-driver—a sturdy peasant of the Ukraine—knew as little about fear as he did about the mechanism of his car. And John Curryer, the smart, luxuriating young man-about-town, had cheerfully endured the rigours of late winter on the steppes and revelled in the awakening of spring when those elusive clues led him farther south. He had slept when and where he could, in crowded, evil-smelling *isbas*, or in beautifully rounded, over-furnished and over-carpeted Kirghiz tents; but more often than not in the pine air of limitless open spaces, watching the setting sun when it turned the drab waters of the great river to liquid fire or the pale moon rising above the immensity of the plain.

It was after a long day's drive in the ramshackle Packard that its owner brought his car to a halt in the main street of a town which Johnnie learned subsequently was Tsaritsyn on the Volga. The man got down from the driving-seat and gruffly informed his

passenger that this was as far as he could take him. He was going no farther.

He pointed up the street and remarked curtly:

"The hotel down there on the right is quite comfortable and they always have good *piva*, and caviare from the river. You can give me twelve gold roubles for my trouble or two hundred in paper money, which you like."

The amount appeared excessive, but Johnnie knew better than to start an argument, paid up his fare in paper money and made his way to the hotel which had been pointed out to him. It was a place frequented by commercial travellers on their way up country from Astrakhan. It was certainly not luxurious, but it was not dirty. Johnnie, who was in his town clothes and carried a suitcase, had no difficulty in getting a room and—what's more!—a bath. Later on he had an excellent supper of caviare and grilled sturgeon, with a large mug of *piva* to wash the meal down; after which, as there was no place in the hotel where he could sit and smoke, he wandered out into the street in search of a café. He didn't find one, but he did come across the illuminated entrance of the local cinema, and in he went.

The programme consisted of two long films of the usual type, not unlike his own amateur efforts in that direction. Blatant propaganda. Wicked aristocrats. Oppressed suffering workers, with scenes of knout and other brutalities galore. Technically, the films were worthless; the photography was poor, the lighting ineffective; but the acting was quite good, and as Johnnie had nothing better to do he stayed on to the end. What really interested him, however, were some very fine pictures of scenery taken in the regions of the Ural. Out-of-the-way villages, with their hemp-thatched roofs and picturesque shrines or wells, nestling on the outskirts of dark forest land. There was one picture which specially pleased him. A wide village street with the whitewashed cottages built edgeways to the road, and amongst the cottages one stone-built house with a tiled roof standing back from the street, with its low encircling

wall and iron gate. The picture was obviously taken some years ago—before the War, probably—at a time when certain military manœuvres were going on in the region, for there were a number of fine-looking horses grouped around the well, and soldiers moving about in the village street who wore the uniforms of a cavalry regiment which Johnnie felt quite certain no longer existed to-day.

At one moment two men came out of the stone-built house and stopped talking for a minute or two at the iron gate. One was an elderly man with flowing hair and beard, and the other a very smart cavalry officer.

Johnnie thought no more about this, while he watched the last item of the programme, until when the show was over he stood for a little while in the small entrance hall, looking at the framed stills that adorned the walls. Amongst these there was the village street with the cottages and the stone house, and the elderly man in conversation with the smart cavalry officer. He was looking at this picture when a voice said close to his elbow:

“I took that myself. Good, isn’t it?”

Johnnie turned to glance at the speaker and saw an undersized man in a shabby town suit who was perhaps the manager of the place. He was a cripple with hunched back and twisted legs, but with a pleasant look of pride in his eyes as he gazed on his own handiwork.

“It was a year or two before the War,” the man went on, seeing that he held Johnnie’s attention. “There were cavalry manœuvres going on all about there, and I was sent by the Uman Cinematograph Company to take as many pictures as I could. This was one of my best.”

“You’ve certainly got a splendid effect of light and shade,” Johnnie said in his impeccable Russian. “What is the name of the village?”

“Varnakieff,” the man replied. “It is not very far from Ufa; up that way, you know. And that man you see there talking to the officer is Alexei Fedorovitch Patchenko, the present Staroshka of the place. He is a

wonderful old man with a heart of gold. I could never have taken the picture if he hadn't done what he could to help me."

While the man spoke, the crowd issuing from the house had gradually thinned out, and soon there was no one left in the narrow hall, only Johnnie and the hunchback. Johnnie didn't want to stay talking here any longer, but the other offered him a cigarette, and then said the few words which, unbeknown to either of them, were destined to change the whole course of John Curryer's life. At the moment what they did was to glue Johnnie to the spot.

"Ah, yes!" the man reiterated with a sigh. "I have always thought that if there is a man in Russia who deserved to look after our Little Father Tsar, that man would be Alexei Fedorovitch Patchenko."

"What do you mean?" Johnnie ejaculated and—as he thought afterwards—showed such eagerness, not to say excitement, that the other, moved no doubt by a sudden feeling of mistrust, withdrew within his shell, pressing his lips together as if to check any further attempt at speech. All he did now was to murmur with vague irrelevance:

"But I was forgetting. . . . You will pardon me, Gospodin. It is late. . . . past closing-time. . . . and the police. . . ."

While he spoke, he switched off the two lights in the hall and then stood by the entrance door with the obvious intent of seeing the stranger off the premises and closing the door after him.

Johnnie mastered his excitement; he took out his lighter and with studied deliberation lit his cigarette, then walked slowly up to the front door, paused there and tried to meet the shifting eyes of the hunchback; but the latter avoided his glance, said: "Good night, Gospodin," and started pushing the door to.

Johnnie held his ground.

"You know, brother," he said, "that I am a friend and a loyal subject of our Little Father. I have come

all the way from England to see how best I can serve him."

"Ah!" the hunchback sighed. "England was once a great country, a rich country, but . . ."

"You would be serving our Little Father, my friend," Johnnie went on persuasively, "if you were to tell me where I can find him."

With a deprecating gesture the man pushed the door to a little farther till it was nearly closed.

"But I know nothing, Gospodin, nothing," he put in hastily. "I am only a poor man in charge of this house. What should I know about the Little . . . about the ex-Tsar or about England? Good night, Gospodin, good night. Pleasant dreams."

The next moment, Johnnie found himself out in the street, the other side of the door, and heard a couple of bolts being pushed home behind him.

The conversation with the theatre manager, which had taken such an unexpected turn, had certainly put John Curryer in possession of a clue which he felt would not be illusory this time. The man's whole attitude, the moment Johnnie showed interest in what he said, proved that he was in possession of a secret and was afraid of betraying it. Also that he feared to let himself go before a stranger, who might prove to be a spy.

Johnnie, in a wild state of excitement, would have liked to set out at once for this village of Varnakieff. "Not very far from Ufa," the hunchback had said; but Ufa was a long way, and the 30th of April was drawing very near. There could be no question of missing the chance of sending messages to Lord Ralstane and to Esther, who, if they were left without news, might be terrified that the worst had happened to him.

There was nothing for it but to continue his journey to Astrakhan now, and directly after he had met the skipper of the Greek ship to make his way back north to Ufa, and, please God, to Varnakieff.

JOHNNIE

CHAPTER XVII

THE 29th of April found him in Astrakhan after a journey—the beauty of which he did not appreciate in his present frame of mind—of a hundred and seventy miles in a sailing boat down one of the grandest rivers in Europe, with the monotonous chant of the boatmen in his ears by day, the most gorgeous expanses of sunset sky at even, and the dawn unfolding like a lovely flower out of the deep blue sheath of the night.

No longer dirty and unkempt or clad in a heterogeneous collection of garments, but looking as like a commercial traveller, alert but rather out-at-elbows, as would deceive the keenest observer, he had found accommodation in an hotel that was mostly frequented by those of his own kind.

On the 30th he was up betimes feeling very excited, and immediately wandered out right through the city to the port. A casual enquiry around the Customs sheds elicited the information that the *Ambrosios*, Captain Nikotis, was due in that day with a cargo of woollen goods. Johnnie hung about the quays for hours at a stretch, but there was no sign of the *Ambrosios* the whole of that day, nor the day after that. She had been delayed, so he was told, by a bad storm in the Caspian. He naturally felt rather anxious, hardly dared to speak to any man, or to reply if he was accosted. In a large city like Astrakhan where Soviet officials were to be met at every turn, there was always the possibility of being spied upon, of being waylaid, perhaps, and robbed of the letter which he had written for the *New Era* and hoped to entrust to the skipper of the *Ambrosios*. He had written the letter during his first night in the hotel, using ambiguous words and phrases destined to mislead

prying eyes. He had also written a short letter to Esther, and this, together with his communication to the chief, he had carried since then tied in a small packet next his skin.

On the second of May in the early morning he had the satisfaction of seeing the Greek ship come sailing into port. Poor Johnnie! He felt that he was on the verge of bursting with impatience while he watched her manœuvring to her berth alongside one of the moles and being made fast. After that there were, of course, endless formalities to go through. Officials boarded the ship and went on shore again. The skipper came off his ship and followed the officials to the Customs sheds, which were a long way off. He had a number of papers in his hands and talked loudly and gesticulated vigorously the whole time. Presently he came back still carrying a number of papers, and the crew then proceeded to unload the cargo, which a number of dock labourers trundled off to the Customs sheds. Several more hours went by, until in the late afternoon the skipper returned with another gang of labourers, who trundled bales of furs to the ship's side and helped the crew to carry these on board.

And all the while, Johnnie was left there to subdue his excitement as best he could. He walked up the whole length of the mole and back again, and again and again, till the soles of his feet felt as if he were walking on hot bricks. Fortunately the weather was fine, not too hot, with a pleasant breeze, and the sunset was gorgeous. Fortunately, also, neither his appearance nor his desultory promenade seemed to arouse any interest. Dock labourers and timber-carriers come and go all day and all over the place in this busy port, and there are always a number of idlers hanging around waiting for a ship or for a job; and Johnnie was lost in that crowd.

It was not till an hour after sundown, when the shades of evening were drawing in fast, that Johnnie spied the Greek skipper standing close by his ship, smoking a

cigar. His eyes appeared to be searching the crowd. Johnnie approached him, wished him "Good evening" in English and mentioned the *New Era* and its chief. He was greeted effusively by Nikotis, and the next moment the small packet of letters passed from Johnnie's hands into those of the Greek.

The *Ambrosios* sailed away the following afternoon, and the skipper told Curryer that she was due back the last day of July or early in August. Johnnie was now free to resume his wanderings. He really was going to Varnakieff, where he firmly hoped to come face to face at last with the ex-Tsar. He collected all his belongings at the hotel and set out at once for the nearest village, where he resumed his disguise of a poor and unwashed *moujik* ready to re-traverse the country which he already knew.

Following up one or two valuable clues which he picked up on the way, Curryer soon obtained confirmation of the fact that the Little Father Tsar, after two years of wanderings, had actually gone for a rest in the village of Varnakieff at the foot of the Urals, in the house of one Patchenko, a faithful subject and friend, who had already once nursed him back to health and strength after the terrible ordeal he had gone through in Yekaterinburg. There he had decided to remain for the winter in close touch with all the prominent loyalists who had sworn fealty to him and to his family.

In Patchenko's house, "God's Anointed," as he was called by the faithful few, lived in an atmosphere of veneration, which Curryer was made to understand actually took the form of pilgrimages organised among themselves by the peasants and tribesmen of South-Eastern Russia. They went in droves of twenty and thirty at a time to join in the special prayers that were offered in the small village church, which had escaped destruction at the hands of revolutionary hordes almost by a miracle, and to gaze on the man who, to their simple understanding, was the representative of God upon earth.

In the course of his trek north from Astrakhan, Johnnie actually came across one or two of these bands of "pilgrims" who were on their way to or from Varnakieff. He looked in his dirty, unkempt state so much like one of themselves that they readily entered into conversation with him, especially as he spoke their language and behaved in every way like a native of these parts. There was not in any of these country folk the same mistrust and terror that a man like the hunchback, and others whom he had met in the cities, had displayed the moment the ex-Tsar was as much as mentioned. They knew so little of what was going on up in Moscow, or even throughout the country, that in their simple minds there was the firm-rooted belief that the Little Father Tsar had only to show himself to his people and all these wild stories of revolution and Bolshevism—whatever that might mean—would just fade away into the limbo of forgetfulness.

JOHNNIE

CHAPTER XVIII

IN the waiting-hall of the municipal building at the railway junction of Uskenpol, a small crowd of peasants and workers were gathered together, some with their women and children, all waiting for their permits to continue their railway journey either to Ufa or wherever they wanted to go. It was close on midday. The train from Samara, due to leave Uskenpol at six o'clock in the morning, had not yet come in; but a delay of six hours meant very little in these days when every kind of organisation—never destined to become efficient as far as the railway system was concerned—was still in its

infancy. The men stood about talking, gesticulating, and now and then throwing an anxious or irate glance on a closed door on which the word "YACHTHA" (Private) was roughly scribbled in black chalk. Most of them wore loose blue shirts open at the neck, and fur caps on their heads. Their wide trousers were tucked into their big boots. Both shirts and trousers were not only much the worse for wear, but bore traces of the vicissitudes undergone during a long and dusty journey. The women, the majority with children huddled up against them, squatted on the floor with their backs to the walls all round the room. The place was insufferably hot. It reeked of every unpleasant odour that it is possible for human beings to accumulate. There were no windows, and only a narrow, glazed partition door which gave on a small vestibule beyond which was the larger main entrance. The partition door stood open, but was blocked by the broad back of a soldier standing on guard in the vestibule. The walls had been whitewashed at one time, but they were now of a nondescript colour with a dado of grease and mud up to the height of a man's shoulder. The children, tired and hungry, whimpered or fought among themselves; their mothers slapped them in the intervals of munching cheese and tough black bread. The men sucked sunflower seeds and spat the husks out on the floor.

"Isn't it a scandal?" one man muttered, and threw yet another glance on the closed door, behind which the inspector of police was ensconced, leisurely finishing his lunch in the company of his subordinate. "It is past midday, and when the train comes in he won't have enough time to sign all our permits."

"The train won't come in just yet," another remarked philosophically.

"And when it does," added a third with a cheerless laugh, "it won't be to-day's train at all, but yesterday's, which is now thirty hours late."

"That won't make any difference. Yesterday's or to-day's. No matter, so long as we get there."

The three men who had been talking together had gradually edged away from the rest of the crowd. They came to a halt in the farthest corner of the room. After a moment or two, three or four other men joined them and then half a dozen more, until they all stood together in a compact little group, talking in whispers.

"It's all very well to say 'no matter,'" one of them said, "but we were to join up with the others at Varnakieff before the sixteenth, and I believe to-day is the fourteenth, so someone told me." He shrugged and added: "It will be the seventeenth before we can get there."

One man spat vigorously on the floor and remarked curtly: "I must see him before he dies."

Whereupon they all murmured something and made the sign of the Cross.

John Curryer, rigged out to look as like this assembly of workers and *moujiks* as possible, insinuated himself in the midst of this small, earnest-looking group.

"Of course," he now said with grave decision, "we shall all see him before he dies, for, please God, that won't be for many years to come."

The others all turned and stared mutely at him. To them he appeared to be something of a stranger, his skin seemed fair beneath its coating of grime, whereas they and their kith and kin were dark and swarthy, almost like Africans; nor was the idiom which he spoke quite like that of the steppes. So they all stared at Johnnie with what for them was unusual distrust. But except for the fairness of his skin and the slightly different intonation of his voice, the stranger—for such they took him to be—appeared just as poorly clad, as ill-fed and as grubby as themselves. Their distrust vanished quickly. They felt that they should have been comforted by his words, but somehow they were in a depressed mood, full of foreboding of an impending catastrophe. One or two murmured: "God grant it!" Others wiped their eyes surreptitiously with the back of their hands.

Somebody asked Johnnie: "Have you had news?"

"Only from a man I met in Samara," Curryer replied.

"What did he say?"

"He was just back from over there and saw Alexei Patchenko, who said that *he* was getting stronger and better every day."

"He hadn't seen . . . *him*?"

"No. Only Patchenko."

"Hush! Better not mention names," an old fellow put in whose shaggy white hair and beard gave him the appearance of a woolly sheep.

There was no time to say anything more just then. A soldier in the usual shabby, untidy uniform of the new military police had entered the building, and thrusting the man at the partition door roughly to one side, he came striding into the hall. Pushing about all those who were in his way as if they were a lot of cattle, he went across to the door labelled "PRIVATE," threw it open and went in. All eyes had followed his manœuvre, and a general atmosphere of hopeful agitation drove away the stolid resignation of a while ago.

The next moment the door of the inner sanctuary was once more opened and the soldier reappeared under the lintel. Here he took his stand with legs planted wide apart and head thrown back, surveying the crowd.

"Now then! One at a time," he commanded.
"And have your passports ready."

The women struggled to their feet and dragged their children after them. There was a general hustle and bustle for families to get together, and a queue was formed with the young and vigorous at the head nearest to the door, and the more diffident and timid at the tail end.

One by one they all filed in, hugging their passports. The soldier only gave them sufficient room for one man to pass in on his right, while another passed out on his left. Those who passed out had an extra paper fastened to their passport. This was the permit signed by the police inspector of the district allowing the bearer to travel by rail to a given destination. A good deal of

commotion arose at the door from time to time when, under the order of "One at a time," a woman found herself separated from her husband, and he was obliged to file in by himself, leaving her to follow alone. No amount of grumbling or protest availed, and if any woman tried to cling to her husband and force her way in with him she was handled pretty roughly by the soldier. Only the children were allowed to remain with their parents; either father or mother was given a permit which included the children.

Anyway, after half an hour was spent in this process everyone there had received a permit. There was only just time to collect impedimenta and to run across to the station, which fortunately was quite close. The group of friends had managed to keep together. Some of them had wife and children with them. The train was at that moment steaming into the station. The whole party scrambled into a compartment, which looked more fit for the conveyance of cattle than for human beings. As a matter of fact, they were converted cattle-trucks with a few deal benches thrown in, on which the women and children were made to sit with their bag and baggage disposed underneath the bench. The men stood about, herded like sheep in a pen. Their respective women-folk had extracted scraps of food out of the bundles they carried, and most of these wretched travellers now were munching black bread or dried fish with a noisy working of their powerful jaws.

Curryer had been lucky enough to secure standing room for himself up against one of the doors of the carriage. He leaned his broad back across it, glad to feel a slight movement of the air on the back of his neck. He, too, was busy munching a piece of black bread and a bit of dried cheese. His keen, grey eyes wandered incessantly over his many fellow sufferers in the over-crowded carriage. The old fellow who looked like a woolly sheep was sitting on the edge of a bench close beside him, and those with whom he had talked in the hall of the municipal building stood in more or less

compact groups all around; but besides these there were a few faces at the farther end of the compartment with which Johnnie was not familiar. He made no remark, however. Once he glanced enquiringly at the woolly sheep, but the old fellow gave an almost imperceptible shrug. He and those others were all bound for Ufa, distant from Uskenpol about 250 miles. They had received their permits to travel as far as that city. The railway journey would take twelve hours, probably more at the rate the ramshackle old engine was moving along a permanent way which was in a terrible state of disrepair. At Ufa they would all alight and go on foot the rest of the way to Varnakieff, the little township at the base of the Urals, where lived Alexei Patchenko, the saintly man who had been honoured and blessed by the presence of the Little Father Tsar under his roof.

JOHNNIE

CHAPTER XIX

THE scene outside the house of Alexei Patchenko in the small village of Varnakieff, which nestles at the foot of the Urals, was a picture which John Curryer never forgot as long as he lived. Though Fate dealt him some terribly hard blows after this; though he saw visions of fame and fortune pass before him like a kaleidoscope, linger for a while before his eyes and then vanish, as it were, in the clouds; though he suffered and endured, hoped and despaired alternately, he never forgot this picture: against a background of towering rocks and dark masses of forest trees the wide village street, bordered by low, whitewashed, hemp-thatched cottages standing edgeways to the road. Half-way up the street

the tall shaft of the well stretched, a huge, straight arm up to the sky, and opposite the well there was a house rather larger than the others, also whitewashed and grey-roofed, but standing slightly back from the road and separated from it by a low wall and small iron gate—the house of Alexei Fedorovitch Patchenko.

Patchenko, as Johnnie had already learned from his fellow pilgrims, was the most important man in the village, the Staroshka elected by the community to preside over its local assembly, the man whose duty it was to regulate the life of the village and to decide when and how the working of the land must be done—the father, in fact, of the community, the head of the small family that dwelt in Varnakieff.

But Alexei Patchenko was something more than that in this summer of 1922. He was the man who, according to popular belief, had been chosen by God to be the guardian and protector of the Little Father Tsar, to give him shelter under his roof and to nurse him back to health, to watch over him, in fact, until such time as a resurrected Russia emerged out of the world of darkness into which the Devil had plunged her, and once more beheld the dawn of a new era wherein she might again worship God unmolested and pray unhindered for the safety and glory of His anointed.

When the pilgrims of whose band Curryer now formed a part came within sight of Varnakieff they saw that a thick crowd had gathered in the village. Men, women and children were standing all down the street and congregating chiefly opposite the house of Alexei Patchenko. Johnnie estimated that there were at least four or five hundred assembled here—peasants, labourers, miners and a good sprinkling of tall, bearded tribesmen on mountain ponies—Khirgiz, Tcherkes, Kalmucks in tall fur hats and showy trappings, which contrasted strangely with the loose-fitting, often tattered, clothing of the peasants and the miserable appearance of the workers in the copper mines close by.

The women and children all carried bunches of wild

flowers; geranium and veronica, mountain stocks and ranunculus; also great sheaves of wheat and of oats. They had come, all these people, some from great distances, in order to be present here on this 16th of July, the anniversary of the wonderful miracle which the Almighty had performed four years ago, when assassins levelled their arms against the Little Father and all his family and murdered the Little Mother Tsaritza and all her children. But God diverted the death-dealing rifle-shot aimed at the sacred person of the Tsar and decreed that the Little Father should live. Curryer and his friends now joined up with the crowd. They had evidently been expected and were made very welcome with friendly greetings and handshakes.

Presently a procession was formed. It was headed by a priest in canonical vestments. Close behind him, under a canopy borne by four village lads, came a very old man. He was bareheaded and had a long white beard which came down to his waist, and a mass of white hair which, fanned by the breeze, fluttered about his forehead. This old man carried in his two hands, held above the level of his eyes, an ikon which represented the Virgin Mary with the Infant Christ in her arms and a wriggling, fire-spouting dragon writhing under her feet. The procession marched down the whole length of the village street and then along a narrow road which wound its way up a rocky incline, on the top of which there was a stone-built shrine. Johnnie joined in with them. He was in his peasant's clothes, and no one took any notice of him. The peasants and workers marched first, behind them came the women and children waving their sheaves of flowers, and then half a dozen tribesmen on horseback. A small detachment of Cossacks, also on horseback and in their traditional red and black, brought up the rear. They all sang mournful, monotonous chants as they walked. When they came to the crest of the foothill where stood the shrine, the priest took the ikon from the old man, carried it to the shrine and placed it there in a niche. The women and children then filed

past and laid their flowers and sheaves of corn and oats at the foot of the ikon.

But the most beautiful moment was yet to come, when the bearded priest stood with his back to the shrine facing the people and said:

"Now let us all be silent for a while and turn our thoughts first to God, praying to Him the He may, in His great mercy and wisdom, preserve our Little Father Tsar from all ills and bring him once more to the throne of his forebears."

Whereupon a great and wonderful silence fell upon the multitude, a silence more impressive than anything man could possibly conceive. These hundreds of people all made the sign of the Cross and folded their hands in prayer. They prayed in silence under the great canopy of the sky now flecked with tiny fleecy clouds tinged rose-red by the kiss of the setting sun. Far away the heights of Jurma and Tastanai, under their mantle of perpetual snow, glistened like a mass of powdered rubies, whilst the rocky inclines showed dark and the forests impenetrable against this living, glowing background of flame. And Time appeared to be standing still whilst hundreds of faithful souls prayed for the welfare of one man.

The sun sank slowly behind the western heights. Twilight extinguished, one by one, the flames on fleecy little clouds, and spread its tender mantle over mountains and forest trees and over that multitude which wound its way leisurely down the declivity back to Varnakieff. It was night before the last of the procession turned into the village street. Cossacks and tribesmen tethered or hobbled their ponies on the gentle slopes of the foothills, but they all joined up together again in the village: men, women, children, peasants, workers and soldiers. In some of the houses a feeble light glimmered through the tiny windows, and soon the moon's silvery light scattered the gathering darkness and shed its cold radiance over thatched roofs and whitewashed walls, over the showy

trappings of the tribesmen and the shoulder-knots of the Cossacks, over the workers' striped 'kerchiefs and the men's blue shirts and sheepskin coats.

They all hung about in the road desultorily for a time, whispering among themselves, the women separately from the men, with children clinging to their ample skirts, and the men all grouped together in earnest conversation. The summer night vibrated with the hum of subdued voices, as if with a swarm of bees, whilst from the slopes above came the sound of horses snorting, the creaking of leather and stamping of hoofs.

An hour, perhaps more, went by. Some of the women and children found hospitality for the night in the cottages; others had to be content with putting their children down to sleep on the patches of turfed ground along the edge of the road. Mothers squatted beside them, some holding their youngest to their breast. And suddenly murmurings and whisperings ceased and every man and woman in the crowd turned to gaze on Patchenko's house. The front door had just been opened, and the Staroshka himself stood on the threshold with arms stretched out towards the crowd.

"Hush!" he said; "the Little Father sleeps."

They all knelt down where they stood: Cossacks and Kirghiz, Kalmucks from the steppes and miners from the Ural, Tcherkes tribesmen and peasants from Siberia, they made the sign of the Cross and clasped their hands in prayer. Once again for the space of two minutes a gentle murmur like the hum of bees filled the moonlit air. The soft singsong intonation of the Russians mingled with the harsh throaty notes of the wanderers on the steppes. The priest stood up and pronounced a blessing. Patchenko went back into his house and closed the door. A few minutes later complete silence descended on the mountain village. The men stretched themselves out on the hard ground, leaving room for the women and children to lie on the small stretches of turf by the roadside, and the moon looked down, silvery

and serene, on these hundreds of loyal souls who had come here to worship and to pray.

One by one the lights in the small windows of the cottages were put out. Only one light remained dim and flickering in Patchenko's house, in the room where the Little Father slept.

John Curryer did not close an eye all night. The scenes which he had witnessed had so impressed him that rest for his nerves was an impossibility. What he had seen and heard went round and round in his brain, and during the long hours of this beautiful summer's night, with the mighty snow-capped "Gates of Asia" towering above and around him, with the scent of pine-wood and weary humanity in his nostrils, with parched throat, be it said, and empty stomach, he recapitulated in his mind everything he meant to say in his next letter to Lord Ralstane. The news, the wonderful news would travel to England and there arouse interest and even excitement such as had never been known since the War-time news.

To Johnnie's credit, be it here recorded, not once did thoughts of himself, or of what the scenes which he had witnessed would mean to him personally, enter into the workings of his brain. Until to-day, and during his long journeyings, he had often toyed with the recollection of Lord Ralstane's promises, with thoughts of the fortune that would be his if he succeeded in the mission which had been entrusted to him. But with the scenes of to-day implanted in his memory—the crowds, the pilgrimage up to the shrine, the murmured prayers and above all Patchenko's solemn "Hush! the Little Father sleeps," and the absolute silence that followed—trivial things like money and a career appeared ridiculous and futile like the fussiness of ants at work on their heaps.

However, he did make up his mind to obtain by hook or by crook Patchenko's permission to enter the house and see the Little Father with his own eyes, and—oh! for the possibility of such a thing—to get a photograph with

the pocket camera which he had never failed to carry about with him. It was small but furnished with a super-Zeiss lens, and if permission was not given to use it openly the photograph might be taken surreptitiously, given a fair amount of luck. John Curryer was far too sensible, too much a man of the world, not to know that here was no question of bribery or other form of persuasion. He hoped before he left Varnakieff to have an earnest talk with Patchenko, and to put before him the whole question of Lord Ralstane's offer to place the vast financial resources and boundless influence of his newspaper organisation at the disposal of the ex-Tsar, and it seemed reasonable to hope that such an offer would not be lightly turned down. He had seen enough in the past four months to feel assured that Nikolas II would find no lack of support either from loyalist troops, or from the tribes of South-Eastern Russia and of Siberia, and if money was lacking Lord Ralstane and his powerful organisation were ready to supply it.

All this and more kept going round and round in John Curryer's brain. He would have to leave Varnakieff fairly soon in order to reach Astrakhan by the end of the month, when the *Ambrosios* was again due to arrive in port. There was so little of the journey that could be done by rail, and he had less than a fortnight in which to cover some six hundred miles of trackless desert land.

But he had great hopes of being able to pick up at Samara the ramshackle Packard which had served him in good stead before. There was no longer any object in lingering on the way or even assuming a disguise. He had obtained all the information which he had been sent out to get, and if in addition to that he succeeded in getting the photograph which he coveted, he would, he decided within himself, have indeed been born under a lucky star. With these pleasant thoughts going round and round in his mind, a sleepless night was not hard to bear. The thoughts were as comforting as any peaceful sleep.

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BOOK IV

SIR MIGUEL



Esther spoke softly to her, and raised her from the ground.

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THE first letter which Lord Ralstane received from Curryer was dated the 30th of April. It came to hand in London via Baku and Constantinople about a fortnight later. The *New Era* did not publish this letter. For one thing it was too ambiguous for general consumption, and did not contain anything definite from which a paragraph could be concocted for the benefit of the readers of that popular daily. John Curryer only gave a few details of his journey first to Moscow and thence to Samara, and promised that his next letter would give an interesting account of the camera work which he had done in the course of his trek southward to Astrakhan. He was evidently determined to be extremely cautious. Mr. Harman, discussing this first communication with his chief, made the remark that he thought Curryer was, if anything, over anxious.

"We don't want him to be too timid," he remarked; "it almost looks as if he was frightened of something."

But Lord Ralstane would not admit that.

"Curryer is not the man to get cold feet," he said decisively. "But you must remember that he has been cautioned, both by me and by Sir Watson James, about likely spies, and he cannot really be too careful about what he says in his letters."

"That's all right enough," Mr. Harman was willing enough to admit. "But of course these ambiguous phrases of his are very misleading. Just listen to this again."

And he picked up Curryer's letter which was lying

on the chief's desk and, turning over the front page, he read the following passage aloud :

"I think that you will be pleased with the way the film is progressing. I have some wonderful shots of mountainous backgrounds and beautiful little villages nestling in rocky scenery. The scenario is working out very well, and we shall be able to do most of the production locally, which is such an advantage.

" You will also be pleased to hear that I am not anticipating any difficulty about supers. Men and women all about here are very keen. As a matter of fact, I am getting rather too many offers of help, and I shall have to sort out the most suitable and most intelligent among the lot. On the other hand, I have not yet come across the right man and woman for the principal parts. One or two have been specially spoken of to me as being suitable, but I must have a man who has had stage or screen experience. Do you remember that good-looking actor we saw together in Paris in a Tchekow play before the War? I rather hope to get in touch with him, as he would do admirably, but I understand that he has given up the stage owing to ill-health and that he lives now in retirement with his wife and family. Well, I'll get to the bottom of all that and send you definite news in a few weeks' time."

Mr. Harman stopped reading and looked at his chief as if he wished to imbue him with the same misgivings which he felt himself. Then, as Lord Ralstane remained obstinately silent, he went on:

" Do you see what I mean, sir? Why does he talk of women at all? Women cannot be a part of the ex-Tsar's army, can they? Then why mention them? And what the—— I beg your pardon, sir—does he mean by 'the right man and woman for the principal parts'? He seems to have women on the brain. As for talking

of the good-looking actor—I suppose here he does mean the ex-Tsar—living with his wife and family, it just looks as if he were trying deliberately to mystify us."

"Of course," Lord Ralstane broke in with some impatience, "of course he is trying to mystify, not us, but any censor or official who might by chance get possession of his letter. And quite right, too. To me the whole letter is clear as daylight. When he speaks of two or three actors having been spoken of to him for the part, he means that there is more than one pretender who claims to be the ex-Tsar. That sort of thing always happens in cases of this sort. Think of the Naundorff family, who still claim to be direct descendants of Louis XVI and his unfortunate son. And all those phrases about 'the right man and woman' and about 'living with his wife and family'—they are only intended to throw dust in the eyes of outsiders. Now, what else have you got to be worried about?" he concluded with a laugh.

But Mr. Harman was not prepared to give up his misgivings yet.

"Well, sir," he said, "what do you make of this piece about the handsome actor having retired from the stage owing to ill-health? If by this handsome actor Curryer means the ex-Tsar, it is not very encouraging. An invalid wouldn't be much use at the head of an army."

"If that is all you've got to worry about now," Lord Ralstane retorted lightly, "you can just dismiss it from your mind. His Majesty has plenty of relatives who can do the fighting for him. The Grand Duke Nikolas, for one, proved himself a wonderful soldier during the late War. So long as we have the ex-Tsar alive that is all we ask for."

And so the matter was allowed to rest for the time being. There had been a few lines for Esther included in Johnnie's communication to his chief, but these, also, were ambiguous, and she could not help feeling rather

anxious and miserable in her loneliness. For she certainly was lonely. Her father was better and Esther decided to join him presently at his sister's house in the country. She would be glad, she thought, to get away from London and the house in Egerton Crescent, which seemed much too large for her in her solitude. Her wedding had originally been fixed to take place in July. Esther's plea for the long engagement was her anxiety about her father. She wanted to see him thoroughly well and strong before she was obliged to go abroad with her husband. Even now Sir Miguel was away on business. He was constantly away. His affairs, it seemed, had so many ramifications, and he appeared to move about the continent of Europe so rapidly, that even the staff which was left in charge of the mansion in Berkeley Square did not know where he was from day to day or when he would be back. All his letters were sent round to his head office in Bucklersbury. But all this would, of course, be different presently as far as Esther was concerned. As Sir Miguel's wife she would, for the most part, be travelling about with him and there would be no need for these constant and lengthy separations.

Before she left for the country Esther called at the office of the *New Era* and had an interview with Lord Ralstane. He was very kind and reassuring, and reiterated the assertion which he had made to Mr. Harman that he was quite certain Curryer was doing his best, and doing it very well in a plucky and cautious manner.

"We shall get his next letter sometime before the end of August," he said confidently, "and you may take it from me that it will be much less ambiguous and full of interest. We have known Nikotis for years and he is absolutely to be trusted. We have written to him again to be on the look-out for our correspondent the next time the *Ambrosios* puts in at Astrakhan, and also to supply him with money or anything he may want. I know that the ship is due in on or about the 30th of July and we shall get your brother's letter,

bar accidents, two or three weeks later. I will wire you directly it arrives."

Encouraging perhaps, but not altogether reassuring. Esther left London with a heavy heart. It almost seemed as if a kind of foreboding weighed upon her spirits. Her aunt's house, too, was anything but cheerful: it was the Lamborough dower-house, very picturesque and stately but rather old-fashioned and comfortless. Lord Frederick, though certainly better, was still far from strong and inclined to be irritable and exacting; and Lady Mary, a disappointed old maid, who had in her youth missed every chance of making a good match, spent most of the day in complaining of the hardness of her lot, or else in finding fault with everything everybody did.

Sir Miguel wrote twice a week to Esther: the letters all bore a London postmark and had been forwarded from the head office. They were full of solicitude for his fiancée's welfare and of passionate protestations of his love for her. His business, unfortunately, was keeping him abroad until the end of June, travelling from place to place, now in Berlin, now in Rome or Vienna or Paris. He never knew, almost from day to day, where he would be in the next twenty-four hours. But wherever he happened to be he always sent a special courier to London twice a week with a packet of letters for his representative in England, and thus was able to communicate regularly with his beloved. He begged Esther in the same way to send all communications intended for him to his head office in Bucklersbury. Every one of his letters ended with the earnest hope that soon after his return to England he would be made the happiest of men by the celebration of his marriage with the most adorable woman in the world.

And somehow after receiving these letters Esther felt more lonely and miserable than she had been before. She missed Johnnie terribly, but she also longed for the companionship of the one man who still had pride of place in her heart. She had heard nothing directly

from Nowell Ffoulkes since the night of the Albert Hall ball and of her official betrothal. That night he had said at the moment of parting: "I can never shut you out of my life. What has been has been, and while I am I and we are both alive you will remain a part of me. If you are happy I shall know it. If you want me I shall be there." These words rang in her ears with heart-rending persistence. She was not happy. Did he know it? She wanted him, oh! so often. Why wasn't he there? Womanlike, she was too proud to ask. And yet sometimes she felt so lonely, so lonely, that she actually took a pen in her hand and started to write to him. But down went the pen again. "I'll wait for an opportunity," she said to herself, "an excuse for writing that would make it less obvious that I need him so badly."

And one day, it was early in June, there was the excuse—more, the obligation to write. The papers were full of an awful motor accident. Two powerful cars going at top speed. A blind turning. A head-on collision. Three dead in one car, four seriously injured in the other. The three dead were Sir Gerald Ffoulkes and his two sons, Andrew and Percy. When Esther first read about the accident she did not realise what the death of his uncle and his two cousins would mean to Nowell. But she knew that he was very much attached to Sir Gerald, and that he had been at school with his cousin Andrew, so she sent him an affectionate and sympathetic letter, to which she received a short one of thanks. A week later she had letters from several friends in London, who all harped on the same subject. "Very sad, of course," was what they all said; "but isn't it wonderful for Nowell Ffoulkes? He comes into the title and Sir Gerald's considerable fortune."

Some of these letters came from mere acquaintances who had seldom troubled Esther with correspondence before. Obviously there was just a soupçon of malice in this allusion to Nowell Ffoulkes's good fortune. "*Il y a toujours quelque chose dans l'infortune de nos amis*

qui ne nous déplait pas," says that very wise La Rochefoucauld; and no doubt these ladies who had secretly envied Esther Curryer her wealthy fiancé whom they knew she did not love, now remembered with a certain amount of satisfaction that she had once been in love with Nowell Ffoulkes and had jilted him—so they believed—for her exotic millionaire. Nowell was a rich man now. She must be wishing that she had waited for him.

But Esther was past resenting any pin-pricks of that sort. She had written again to Nowell, but this time he had not even replied. That night in the box at the Albert Hall he had talked sentimental nonsense: apparently it had not come from the heart and was a mere personation of the character of Pierrot which he had assumed. Light-hearted, irresponsible, shallow: his words empty and meaningless, cruel in that they had the power to hurt her after all these months and would retain that power for many years to come.

Somehow Esther managed to live through those summer months without letting anyone guess how miserable she really was. Throughout her life and its many vicissitudes she had always been too proud to wear her heart on her sleeve. Johnnie had been her only intimate friend, and in a certain measure her confidant; but only in a certain measure, because she had never spoken to him about her love for Nowell. Not even to him. And now Nowell was silent and Johnnie far away. And the day fixed for her wedding was fast approaching. Her father was distinctly better, and in the third week of June Sir Miguel Alvalho was back in London, more solicitous, more generous, more passionately in love than ever before.

The date of the wedding was definitely fixed for the 20th of July. The honeymoon was to be spent motoring in Austria, Hungary and the Tyrol. When all this was being discussed Esther clung to the hope that with a final decision on that score she would feel more at peace

with the prospect of her future life. There is always something soothing in thoughts of the inevitable. But somehow this hope, like so many others, proved to be just a disappointment. When dates and itinerary were fixed she felt more restless, more imbued with a strange sense of impending calamity than ever before, until she came to dread the very thought of her marriage. That was all wrong, of course. Sir Miguel was kindness and consideration themselves. Lord Frederick owed so much to his generosity, and she, Esther, had pledged her word of her own free will, so that there could be no question of going back on it.

But there the foreboding remained, and it seemed useless to try and combat it.

All the arrangements for the wedding were ready. At Esther's insistent request it was to be a very quiet affair, to take place from her aunt's house in the country. Lady Mary had been ailing for some time. A severe attack of bronchitis had affected her heart, and this was quite sufficient excuse for dispensing with guests, bridesmaids and all the usual paraphernalia. Sir Miguel, though somewhat disappointed at first—he would have liked an ultra-smart Society function—quickly deferred to Esther's wish in the matter. It seemed, indeed, as if his one aim in life was to indulge his future wife in everything she might desire.

And on July the 13th, a week before the day fixed for the wedding, Lady Mary was found one morning by her maid dead in her bed. A heart attack in the night had proved fatal. She died not knowing how her simple unimpressive departure from life would affect the destiny of all the people with whom she had been most intimate. To begin with, the wedding had, of course, to be postponed, while Sir Miguel's departure for Austria could not, he declared sorrowfully, be delayed. Elements in his business which were of international importance demanded his presence in Vienna on the day which he had originally fixed for

his visit there. Esther was too discreet and Lord Frederick too indifferent to enquire what those elements were. Neither of them knew really what Sir Miguel's business consisted of. Financial, of course, with ramifications all over the Continent, but he never spoke of his affairs, nor had Esther ever met any of his business associates.

A fresh date was fixed for the wedding. It was to take place quietly in London sometime in September. Esther could not help feeling thankful for this delay. By the middle of August there would be news from Johnnie.

SIR MIGUEL

CHAPTER XXI

ESTHER had no difficulty in persuading her father to return to London soon after her aunt's funeral. As a matter of fact he was delighted to go, for now that he was so much better in health, he found life in this quiet country place very dull and irksome. He didn't care for the neighbours, was at loggerheads with the parson, and felt that these ignorant local bumpkins had an altogether wrong idea about his past financial troubles. He missed his club, his cronies and his bridge. He was homesick for Piccadilly and the Park, and it made his heart ache with envy when he read about those brilliant first nights at the theatre or the cinema.

Fortunately there was every excuse for going back to Town. After Lady Mary's death, the dower-house devolved on a younger sister who was married and who desired to enter in possession immediately with her husband and family. So that was all to the good, and Esther was more than thankful that matters had

been made so easy for her. The middle of August was getting very near when there would be news of Johnnie, and somehow she longed to be in London where she could keep in touch with Lord Ralstane and hear the news directly it came to hand.

But day followed day, August trod on July's heels, and there was no news. After the 15th of August Esther telephoned every morning to the *New Era* office, and every morning she learned with a heartache, that grew in intensity as time went on, that there was no news. On the 26th Lord Ralstane rang her up to ask if he might come and see her. She tried to get him to say something more over the telephone, but he wouldn't do that. He preferred to call, he said, if he might.

He came in the afternoon. Esther, feeling sick with foreboding, tried to appear brave.

"Tell me," she said quietly, as soon as they were both seated and she had offered him a cocktail which he refused.

"The news is not bad," he hastened to tell her, "but I wanted to see you, rather than talk to you over the phone."

"What is it?"

"We've had a letter from Nikotis, the skipper of the Greek ship, you know."

"Yes?"

"He didn't see Curryer in Astrakhan when his ship touched there at the end of July."

"Meaning?"

"Nothing, I hope. Harman and I have been re-reading your brother's first letter, and we are both of the opinion that after he had handed it over to Nikotis he made tracks for those villages up in the mountains of which he spoke. It was in one of those villages that he hoped to find the Tsar, of that I am quite sure. And if you will re-read the letter you will, I know, agree with me. I have had a copy made of it as I thought you would like to read it again and keep it by

you. The re-reading of it ought to reassure you as it certainly has reassured Harman and myself."

While he spoke Lord Ralstane had taken a letter out of his pocket-book and this he handed to Esther. She took it and for the next few minutes remained absorbed in reading it twice through. When she had done so she folded it up and put it in her handbag.

"Why," she asked simply, "do you think that re-reading this letter ought to reassure me? I don't see . . ."

"Simply because," he replied, "travelling across these outlying parts of Russia where there are no railways, no motor cars, only shockingly bad roads and ramshackle vehicles, is a very slow business. Though Curryer's letter is very ambiguous, I think we are all agreed that after he had seen Nikotis on the 30th of April, he went back north to seek out these out-of-the-way villages in the Ural Mountains where he hoped to meet the Tsar. It seems to be a matter of at least twelve or fourteen hundred miles, as I say, without railway or motor cars to help one along. I don't know how long it would take him to go there and back; several weeks certainly, and added to this there is always the possibility that he spent some time in the village. Say he did meet the Tsar, he would have several interviews with him, and probably with other important persons also. He may have been kept waiting for the arrival of other members of the Imperial family. He may have gone to visit your aunt, Princess Rabrinski. I mean," Lord Ralstane went on persuasively, "that all sorts of eventualities may have occurred to delay your brother's coming and going, or getting away in time to be back in Astrakhan on the 30th of July. And honestly, I don't think there is the slightest reason for anxiety."

"You mean not yet?"

"Put it like that, if you like. But I'll tell you what I have done. I have wired to Nikotis to return at once to Astrakhan to make all enquiries there as discreetly as he can and let me know the result at once by cable.

He really should have written at once when he failed to meet Curryer. But he waited till he was back at Enzeli, and that is why we only heard to-day. However, he will receive my wire some time to-morrow, and, of course, he will leave at once, as naturally he can always rely on us to make any extra voyage worth his while."

"You are wonderfully kind," Esther murmured.

"There is no question of kindness in this matter, my dear. I hope you'll believe me when I say that I am as anxious about your brother's welfare as if he were my own son; and as a matter of fact when first I made up my mind to give him the chance he asked me for and to send him to Russia, he looked so eager, so young and so handsome that I took him there and then to my heart, chiefly because he reminded me so much of the boy I lost."

He paused a moment, and then added earnestly: "You do believe me, don't you?"

By way of reply Esther just put out her hand, and Lord Ralstane took it and held it for a few seconds in his own. Before he released it he gave it a gentle, fatherly pat. Esther couldn't speak. Tears were choking her voice.

"And now before I go," Lord Ralstane resumed, "I want you to promise me one thing."

"What is it?"

"That you will try and not worry too much."

"I will try, but I don't know that I shall succeed," she added with a sorrowful little smile.

"Oh yes, you will, if you will bear this in mind: I told your brother before he left that all the influence I possess, as well as the great financial resources of my newspaper organisations, will be at the disposal of the Tsar to enable him to recover his throne. So now let me tell you, equally solemnly, that the same influence and financial resources will be at your disposal should your brother be in any serious danger through doing his duty by us. You won't forget that, will you?"

"No," she murmured softly. "I won't forget."

"When do you expect Sir Miguel back?"

"In about a fortnight. But you know how uncertain he is."

"And what about the date of your wedding?"

"We've fixed it for the nineteenth."

Ralstane rose and said cheerfully:

"We'll have the best of news of your brother long by then. Take my word for it."

He gave Esther's hand another kindly pressure before he took his leave. A manservant opened the door and he passed out of the room. The last he saw of her was her tall, straight figure standing in the middle of the room motionless, her beautiful face, white and drawn, with soft brown hair lying in close waves on her broad forehead, and her great, dark eyes shining with unshed tears. But once out in the street, a troubled look crept into his own eyes and he murmured to himself:

"I wish I could think that the boy is safe."

SIR MIGUEL

CHAPTER XXII

A FORTNIGHT later there came a cable from Nikotis:

"No news of correspondent "it said". Went north beginning of May. Traces of him up to Samara early July. Nothing more after. Believed arrested by Soviet."

Lord Ralstane handed the cable over to Mr. Harman.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

Harman read the short message through two or three times before he replied:

"There is nothing definite about the arrest. It mayn't be true."

"I hope to God it isn't. But what about the rest? Curryer went north, which I suppose means that he trekked up to those villages in the mountains where the Tsar was said to be. In his last letter to us," Ralstane went on thoughtfully, "Sir Watson James said something about the Soviets having established police administrations in all the provinces east of the Volga."

"Even so," Mr. Harman protested, "it proves nothing."

"I know. But the fact is disquieting."

Harman had never seen his chief quite so despondent. He certainly seemed to take a gloomy view of the situation. Very naturally, thought Mr. Harman, as he alone was responsible for sending Curryer out there. He had been so tremendously keen on the affair. It had absorbed his thoughts ever since the boy went off to Russia, and at first he had appeared wonderfully hopeful and confident. Harman knew also that Ralstane had taken a great liking to Esther, and that he found the task of conveying bad news to her very trying. Even now he said with a heavy sigh:

"I suppose I had better go round to Egerton Crescent right away."

He fidgeted about with various things on his bureau, putting papers together, thrusting others into drawers.

Harman suggested diffidently: "Hadn't we better phone to Sir Miguel first? He is in town, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"You might ask him to break the news."

Ralstane frowned, undecided what to do.

"I wonder how much he knows," he remarked.

"Miss Curryer must have told him, I should think."

"She promised not to tell anyone."

"If you'll excuse me, sir, she did not. Curryer promised not to tell anyone except his sister. But no woman could be bound to keep an important matter like that a secret from her future husband. Sir Miguel knows, of course, how attached brother and sister are to one another. And anyhow," Harman added after

a slight pause, "there is no reason why he should not be told everything now."

"Perhaps you are right," Ralstane was willing to admit after a few moments' hesitation. "Phone to him, will you, Harman?"

But in the end it was Lord Ralstane who brought the evil news to Egerton Crescent.

"You are putting an unfair burden on me," Sir Miguel had said in response to the suggestion that he should be the one to break the news to his fiancée. "I did know about the mission to which you sent young Curryer, and Miss Curryer knows how strongly I disapproved of it. He was not the right man for the job. Too young, for one thing—"

"His knowledge of Russian was such an asset," Lord Ralstane remarked.

"It won't keep him out of gaol, or safe from a firing squad," Sir Miguel countered dryly. And presently he reaffirmed his decision :

"No, my dear Ralstane, I won't go and break the news. The cable was sent to you. It is for you to pass it on to Miss Curryer."

And that was his last word. Nothing would move him, and Lord Ralstane had the heart-rending task of calling on Esther with that miserable cable in his pocket. He never spoke to anyone about that interview, not even to Harman. All he would ever say was: "She is a woman in a thousand. Her courage is amazing. And she did not give way. Not once. When I left her she looked quite hopeful."

Esther was alone in the small library at Egerton Crescent when Sir Miguel Alvalho was announced. His visit had been preceded by a magnificent basket of white roses, which she was, at the moment, arranging in a couple of beautiful cut-glass bowls.

"They are lovely," were the first words she spoke after he had taken her in his arms and kissed away the

tears which had gathered in her eyes. She remained quite placid under his kisses, more yielding, more submissive than he had ever known her before.

"And you are the loveliest thing God ever made," he murmured with passionate earnestness.

She extricated herself gently from his too ardent embrace and pushed him away with her two hands against his breast.

"Come and sit down here, Miguel," she said lightly.

He gave a short, impatient sigh and sat down, as she commanded, next to her on the small settee. She offered him a cigarette and took one herself.

"You have heard the news, haven't you?" she asked after they had both smoked in silence for a few minutes.

"Yes," he replied, "and that is one of the reasons why I have come so quickly on Ralstane's heels. He wanted me to be the bearer of evil tidings," he went on with a smile. "But, of course, I refused. What I want to be, my dear, is not an emissary"—and Miguel's voice as he said this had become wonderfully tender and mellow—"but a comforter."

He captured her hand and raised it to his lips.

"And now," he went on more lightly, "let me tell you something that I think will please you. I have slightly modified our plans for the nineteenth, and I hope that the new arrangements will meet with your approval."

A look of puzzlement crept into her eyes.

"The nineteenth?" she echoed frowning.

"I thought it would be more pleasant for you," he hastened to explain, "if we motored to Dover in time for the afternoon boat. I have arranged for Jackson to meet us at Calais with the Rolls; and then, instead of staying in Paris, which is insufferable this time of year, we might go as far as Versailles—that is, if you were not too tired. In anticipation of your approval," he continued glibly, "I have booked a suite of rooms at the *Reservoirs*. It is still the best hotel there."

Esther still looked as if she did not understand what Sir Miguel was talking about. She kept her eyes

fixed upon his as if she wondered what it all meant. When he finished speaking she again murmured: "The nineteenth?" as if those two words were an enigma the solution of which escaped her. But now it was his turn to look puzzled.

"Why, yes," he said. "This is the ninth, and in ten days will be our wedding-day."

And Esther murmured under her breath:

"Our wedding-day!"

She hadn't thought of that. Lord Ralstane had called and brought bad news about Johnnie and this had put all thoughts of her fast-approaching wedding-day clean out of her mind. Her wedding-day? In ten days? And Johnnie a prisoner! Threatened with death! Her wedding-day! How could she as much as think of her wedding-day?

Something of all this must have shown in the lines of her face, for Miguel suddenly took possession of her hands once more, of both this time, and gazed searchingly into her eyes, a look of trouble and anxiety expressed in his own.

"You had not forgotten, my beautiful, had you?" he asked.

"No, no," she hastened to assure him. "But . . ."

"But what, my dear?"

"Don't you see?" she cried out suddenly.

"What?"

"That I couldn't," she pleaded. "I couldn't . . ."

"Couldn't what?"

"Go through a ceremony of marriage, start off for a pleasure trip . . . Dover . . . Paris . . . Versailles . . . Oh! I don't know," she went on vaguely, "but I just couldn't, not until I know that Johnnie is safe."

She had withdrawn her hands, but now he recaptured them and held them firmly, masterfully, with a grip that bruised, and for the first time since he had held her in his arms a few moments ago a look of hardness crept into his face.

"Johnnie is going to be safe," he said, and forced

his voice to tones of gentleness. "I pledge you my word and half my fortune, if need be, that Johnnie will be safe."

Then, as she remained silent, unyielding, with tragic eyes and obstinate mouth, he insisted:

"You believe in my word, don't you?"

"Yes, yes, of course," she murmured impulsively.

"And I am giving you my word," he reiterated with passionate insistence, "that Johnnie will be safe."

Again she made no reply. Her eyes remained tragic and her mouth obstinate. The hard look in his face became more marked, but he was making a great effort to control himself, to remain outwardly calm in face of this conflict of wills which he had never anticipated, even for a moment. Confronted with this unexpected show of obstinacy, he felt inside himself the passionate determination to break it. All that was domineering and half Oriental in his nature rebelled against the very thought of giving way to a woman's caprice. For he only looked upon her attitude as a caprice, and upon this conflict of wills as a certainty of victory for his rights as a man and future lord and master of his wife's fate.

And when she pleaded with pathetic earnestness: "You do see . . . don't you?" and then again: "I couldn't . . . I couldn't . . . You must see . . . you must . . ." he lost what control he had over his temper. Suddenly he ceased to be the humbly adoring lover. He became the master, impatient of resistance, exacting obedience.

"I see nothing," he said harshly, "except the fact that I love you with all my soul, that I long and ache for you as no man has ever longed for a woman before, and that I shall go mad if I am again cheated of that wonderful day for which I have yearned for months till my brain has nearly given way under constant disappointments. Mad, I tell you! I shall go mad if you make me suffer like that again."

He was like a tiger that is being robbed of its prey. His voice was rough and unsteady, his grip on her hands was like steel. Did he want to frighten Esther into

submission, feeling that she was striving to defy him? Perhaps. But Esther was not a woman to be frightened. Her mind was bent on the brother she loved, and on the danger to his precious life. She had made up her mind to a certain course of action and no power in the world was going to deter her from it. She was going to Russia to find Johnnie, to be near him, to work for his release, and to bring him home to safety. There was no getting away from that. Wedding-day or no wedding-day, Miguel's desire, his love, his hold over her, her father's debt to him—nothing was of any account. She was going to Russia. She had made up her mind to that as soon as Lord Ralstane had shown her the cable from Nikotis. She said nothing to him about her decision, and she didn't intend to say anything to Sir Miguel, either. She knew that both these men—Sir Miguel especially—would oppose her with all the strength and influence they possessed, try to influence her by talk of dangers which she would encounter and be unable to combat, and if she refused to be frightened by such talk, they would find means of creating obstacles, secret means, that would paralyse her movements, prevent her crossing frontiers or journeying across the country. Both these men had begged her to trust them, and she did trust them to the extent of being absolutely sure that they would do everything in their power to trace Johnnie's whereabouts, and by diplomatic ways to obtain his release. But she had no faith in diplomatic ways! Ye gods! Gentlemanly ways with a crowd of murdering brutes, whose blood-lust had led them to wholesale assassinations! Gentlemanly ways which meant endless delays, while Johnnie lingered in a fetid prison, dying of hunger and disease! No, no, and again No! She was not going to trust either of them sufficiently to leave Johnnie's fate entirely in their hands. She was going to Russia whatever happened.

Fortune had favoured her plans in one way. Sir Miguel, in anticipation of their honeymoon, which was to be spent motoring on the Continent, had only last

week seen about her passport and arranged for all the necessary visas. The only visa he did not get for her was the Russian. "You won't need that," he had said when he brought her the passport. "I wouldn't dream of taking you to that God-forsaken land."

It seemed a small matter at the moment, but now it loomed largely as a barrier athwart her plan, only to be dismissed with the certainty that she would overcome that obstacle and every other, big or little, that kept her away from Johnnie.

Womanlike, she now altered her tactics. She no longer appeared distressed and obstinate. The more ardent and violent Miguel became, the more quiet, almost submissive did she now seem, until gradually he regained control over himself, looked almost ashamed of his outburst when he met her calm, untroubled gaze and felt the gentle pressure of her hand which had suddenly become quite cool and steady. He lowered his eyes. Yes! he was ashamed.

"My beautiful!" he murmured softly, "try and forgive me. I was a brute, ranting and raving as I did. You are an angel not to punish me."

He drew out his handkerchief and passed it across his damp forehead. The effort he was making to get hold of himself was quite pitiable to see. He kept on murmuring under his breath: "My beautiful, my beautiful!" and stooped to kiss her hands. His hot lips lingered long on her soft, cool palms. "I am so ashamed," he went on. "Try and forgive me."

At last he ventured to meet her glance again. It was quite serene, and he drew a deep sigh of relief. What a fool he had been to think that she would deliberately run counter to his wishes. She was too much the perfect woman for that: the woman with character and a will of her own which she would always—and with pride—make subservient to her husband. And now he was happy, so happy, for he read it in her eyes that she was that perfect woman, as submissive as she was strong.

"And now tell me, my dear," he resumed in his accustomed deferential tone which he always assumed when speaking to his future wife, "tell me if you approve of the new plans for our honeymoon."

She nodded silently in reply.

"Versailles, rather than Paris?"

"Yes," she said. What did it matter what she did say, or what she let him think? She was going to Russia to find Johnnie whatever decision he might take.

His leave-taking, half an hour later, was tender, humble, and with it all rapturously ardent. He held her in his arms as if he could never let her go again. Esther, who was sincerely grateful to him for everything that he had done for her father and knew how to appreciate his fine nature and generous disposition, felt a little remorseful at thought of the treachery which she was contemplating. She was going to Russia, and before the day fixed for the wedding he would come and call on her as usual and find her gone. Somehow her heart gave a sudden quick beat when she thought of that moment when it would be brought home to him that she had deceived him. Oh, not seriously, because she would not be gone long. Only let her find Johnnie and drag him out of prison and she would be back, more loving than she had ever been, and more submissive to his slightest whim than he could possibly wish.

The reaction when he found her gone would, of course, be frightful; but strangely enough it never entered Esther's head to think that he would act in a mean or petty way. The mixture of southern and Oriental blood in him might make of him a raging tiger, but never a slinking jackal. And she would leave behind for him a letter so full of affection, of tenderness and of understanding that the very blow which she dealt him would seem almost like a caress.

SIR MIGUEL

CHAPTER XXIII

No one is likely to dispute the fact that a beautiful woman can, more often than not, accomplish things that are denied to less favoured mortals. Esther was clever as well as beautiful. She knew that axiom and had tested it more than once. This morning she was going to Belgrave House, where was housed the temporary Soviet Delegation to Great Britain, and it was from its chief officials that she hoped to get what she wanted—a visa on her passport and such permits as were necessary for travelling in Russia. She would probably have to pay heavily for all that. The question of bribery might also crop up. Esther did not mean to leave anything to chance.

She had a little money of her own—four or five thousand pounds bequeathed to her by her godmother. In a fit of patriotic fervour she had invested the money in War Loan and from this she derived a tiny income, just sufficient for pin money. Recently she had only spent a very little of that, with the result that a few hundred pounds had accumulated in her account at the bank. Her first errand on this important morning was a visit there, where she drew out a couple of hundreds in ten-pound Bank of England notes. These she stowed away in her handbag, and subsequently she gave an order for the sale of a couple of thousand pounds' worth of her Loan certificates. With that money in her pocket she would then be ready to start for Moscow.

In the meanwhile twenty crisp bank-notes were reposing in her handbag, and off she drove to Belgrave House. Bolsheviks and Red revolutionaries are much the same as other men: that is to say, they are just as

amenable to a woman's charm and to an engaging smile. Esther, exquisitely dressed with expensive simplicity, sailed into the outer office at Belgrave House and presented her request for a visa to her passport to enable her to journey to Russia to visit her relations there. Anyone else under the same circumstances would probably have been commanded to leave the passport for examination and wait for a written communication anent the visa. Not so Esther. The clerk behind the grating which screened him from the public opened a small casement which was in his way in order to have a good look at this extremely attractive suppliant. His enquiring glance was responded to by such an engaging smile that he leaned with his arms over the counter and entered into conversation with this "comrade" who was so very different from most others of the same ilk, slouchy men and ugly women who encumbered his office on one or other errand bent and were not nearly so pleasing to look at as this one.

"Will you give me your passport, comrade?" was how he began the conversation—in Russian, of course, for he had no reason to suppose that she was English. He took the passport from Esther and made a show of studying it, all the while that his eyes beneath bushy eyebrows and behind large horn-rimmed spectacles wandered intermittently to the alluring picture before him. He memorised her name, her age, her status, and took a long time over it, asking her various desultory questions, all in Russian. Behind him a bevy of female clerks tapped away on their typewriters, making an incessant clatter that effectually prevented this pleasant conversation from reaching inquisitive ears. Where exactly did she want to go in Russia? was one of the questions he put to her. Russia was a very big country.

Esther said that she knew it was. As a matter of fact she was going to a place called Ufelgrad, where some relations of hers were living. Her cousins and an aunt, who was her mother's sister. Yes, her mother

was Russian. Alas, she was dead! She herself spoke Russian perfectly. She was fond, oh, so fond of Russia and of her Russian relations. Once at Ufelgrad, where she had spent several years of her childhood, she probably would never want to leave the country again.

Questions and answers took some considerable time. The impressionable clerk saw to it that they did. Female typists came to his elbow from time to time with papers to be examined, or seeking information. They were curtly dismissed by him, sent about their business with a glance over his shoulder, while he basked in the engaging smile of "Comrade Esther Curryer." Bolsheviks and Red revolutionaries are human after all. Office hours were so very dull, and this was such a pleasant way of breaking into them.

As it happened, there came a moment when a door at the back of this outer office was opened. The tap-tapping on the typewriters ceased abruptly. All eyes were turned to the door through which an elegantly dressed, middle-aged man had just emerged. He took a quick glance round and said a curt: "Don't stop!" The typewriters re-started to click and tap and the heads of the typists were once more bent to their task. The newcomer strode across the room where the clerk had already closed the casement and, ensconced, as before, behind the grating, had assumed a serious, business-like air.

"Someone in a hurry for a visa, comrade," he said in answer to the other's glance of stern enquiry; whereupon the latter directed another enquiring glance, through the grating and at Esther this time.

"Visas cannot be granted in a hurry," was what he said, and said it curtly too, looking as serious and as business-like as his subordinate until he caught sight of that engaging smile which had already wrought such havoc in the heart of the impressionable clerk; whereupon the abruptness of his manner was considerably modified.

"You wish to go to Russia?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yes, comrade, as soon as possible," was her reply.
"Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I am anxious to visit my relations in Ufelgrad, and I would like to do the long journey before the cold weather sets in."

"You are Russian, of course?"

"Half Russian, comrade. It is all stated on my passport."

The newcomer, who was presumably a highly placed official, took the passport from his subordinate, glanced at it and said to Esther:

"Will you come with me, comrade, and we'll see what can be done?"

He led the way to his private office. Esther, before she passed through the door, sent a grateful glance in the direction of the amiable Bolshevik, seeing which a knowing smile appeared on the faces of most of the lady typists, and winks of amusement and understanding were exchanged over the typewriters, the female of the Bolshevik species being apparently just as human as the male.

Esther Curryer, outwardly a diffident suppliant, made a triumphal entry into the private office of the highly placed official. She had won the first round, for here she was, received in private audience by Alexander Ivanovitch Gorobzoff, a high official attached to the Soviet Delegation in London. His name and status were printed on a large card which stood in a frame on his desk. It was nice, Esther thought, to be able to speak to the man by his name. It seemed to give an air of intimacy to the interview.

The room was well furnished, with a fine carpet on the parquet floor, leather chairs and a substantial-looking desk.

Comrade Gorobzoff offered Esther a cigarette and lit one for himself. She was well aware that when he held the lighter to her cigarette his hand lingered against hers at least one moment longer than was necessary;

which was all to the good. She settled herself comfortably in the capacious armchair and smoked in silence for a few moments, while he, equally silent, appeared to be deeply absorbed in the study of her passport.

Presently he asked: "And what is your special desire, comrade?"

"A visa on my passport, comrade," Esther replied, "and the necessary permits for travelling from Moscow to Samara and Uskenpol."

"You know that part of the country?"

"I have my nearest relations living in the province," she explained. "My mother was Russian, by name Andrieff. She is dead, but her sister, my aunt, who married a Rabrinski, still lives, I hope. I am not sure, of course, as it is many years since I had direct news from her or my cousins. But she and her daughters are my only link with Russia now, and I would not like to lose touch with them altogether."

Esther Curryer was earnest and plausible. What's more, she had fine eyes which she kept fixed with an appealing glance on Alexander Ivanovitch Gorobzoff's face. She also had a soft, musical voice, the tone of which was not only pleading but caressing. This high official of the Soviet Delegation was no less impressionable than his subordinate had been, a fact which Esther, who had so much at stake, did not fail to note.

"I quite understand all that, comrade," he now said, "but I am afraid that getting all these papers you require will take time. . . . The visa, of course, might be done at once, but I shall have to apply to Moscow for the travelling permits . . . and," he added with a smile, "they are apt to be rather slow over there."

Esther said nothing for a moment or two. She appeared to be studying the mentality of this man who, she felt, held Johnnie's fate in his hands. After these few silent moments she opened her handbag and half drew out the wad of English bank-notes.

"I am willing to pay what is required," she said deliberately.

"It is not a question of that," he hastened to assure her.

But there was something in his voice and in his manner which seemed to belie his words. He was not going to admit that he himself was amenable to a bribe. Oh, dear me no! Officials of the Soviet Delegation were above such things. But the need of the moment had sharpened Esther's perceptions. Even while Comrade Gorobzoff was warmly protesting the integrity of his department she made up her mind that the man was venal, and that the only question was what price she would have to pay for what she wanted.

"I only thought," she said sweetly, "that getting the permits quickly would entail a great deal of extra work on your subordinates. You know, comrade," she went on with subtle flattery, "we English are practical people. You are idealists, of course. But even idealists must descend to earth sometimes. For the sake of your staff, some of whom are probably men with large families and small means, can I not persuade you to set your idealism aside for this once? I am asking a great deal, I know, but I am willing to pay for what I ask. Look! I have brought the money with me...."

Slowly she counted out five crisp bank-notes, representing fifty pounds, put them down on the desk, and laid her hand upon them.

"If fifty pounds is not enough," she said, looking as ingenuous as a child, "I can make it a hundred. The half of me that is English likes to pay full price for what it wants."

Alexander Ivanovitch Gorobzoff had sat in silence while this very beautiful Eve tempted him to his fall. The expression in his eyes had been contemplative at first, but when those crisp notes were so ingenuously displayed before him, and a musical voice tickled his ear with such delicate cajolery, that expression changed to covetousness. He cleared his throat, deliberately avoided her glance, and appeared absorbed in brown study. But only

for a time. Presently he looked up and met that engaging smile again. A man may hold the most *outré* revolutionary opinions, he may be a Bolshevik of the deepest scarlet dye, but he will always—or nearly always—succumb to a woman's charm when it is wielded for his especial subjugation. Comrade Gorobzoff was no exception to this rule. He was as human as his subordinate, and that engaging smile silenced the last lingering whisper of his none too sensitive conscience.

He rose, said abruptly: "I will see the chief," and strode out of the room, taking Esther's passport away with him.

She heard him moving about among the maze of lady typists, she heard the opening and shutting of a door; then nothing but the rattle of keys on the typewriters. She was alone for the moment. The smile at once faded from her lips and the troubled look, never long absent from her face these days, came back into her eyes. She glanced down on the wad of notes, the price of Johnnie's safety. She never doubted for a moment that if only she could get to Russia she could work for his release with certainty of success. Something irresistible had urged her to go, from the moment when Lord Ralstane showed her Nikotis's cable with those awful words: "Believed arrested by Soviet." She looked upon that urge as a call, a call direct from Johnnie, transmitted over the air. To have tried to resist it would have been tantamount in her eyes to allowing the wolves to devour him. Never again after that would she know a moment's peace, and if anything tragic happened to him she would feel guilty of fratricide. And she did love Johnnie so dearly, so dearly! There was only one man in the world who shared her heart with him, and that one was silent and far away.

Gorobzoff returned in about ten minutes. He no longer had the passport in his hand.

"I've had a talk," he said, "with the chief, and he is quite prepared to give you the visa and permits which you need for travelling to Moscow first, where you will have to report, and then to Samara and Uskenpol. From there you may have to get a special permit to visit your relations in the country, but the chief says that you will not have any difficulty about that. He will give you a letter to a friend in Moscow, who will see that you get it with as little delay as possible."

He paused a moment, sat down at his desk, rested his elbows on it and cupped his chin in his hands. Esther looked at him, serene and smiling, for she had the certainty now that she would get what she wanted. The man's attitude, his hesitation, a certain look of shamefacedness in him, all pointed to the fact that both he and the anonymous "chief"—supposing there was such a person—were quite amenable to bribery.

"The chief," Gorobzoff resumed, "quite agrees that it would be unfair to put a lot of extra work on our staff. The delegation is very seriously overworked as it is. The matter of the visa on your passport is trifling enough, but there will be a great deal of correspondence in connection with the permits, and——"

"Do not trouble to explain, comrade," Esther broke in artlessly. "I quite understand. In fact, I am deeply grateful to you and your chief that you have adopted my point of view. I should have been really unhappy if your overworked staff had additional burdens of correspondence put on them on my behalf."

She felt quite sorry for this amiable Bolshevik, who was doing his best to screen his "chief's" venality as well as his own. What did she care if these men were venal? Thank Heaven that they were. She wondered whether that mysterious "chief" really existed. If so, who was he? Surely not one of the tip-top men in the delegation. Those men would not be amenable to bribery, she was sure. It was evidently a matter between her friend Gorobzoff and, perhaps, someone placed just above him who had the business of

permits and visas in his hands. Well! What did any of that signify when it was Johnnie's life that was at stake?

There followed a rather uncomfortable silence. Esther counted out a further five bank-notes and placed the ten of them together back on the desk. Gorobzoff covered them over with a paper-weight. He was obviously ill at ease, and avoided looking down on the notes. He rose after a moment or two and offered Esther a cigarette, which she took. He lighted one for himself, marched once or twice across the room before sitting down again. Esther tried to make desultory conversation, spoke of the weather, of Scotland, of shooting and winter sports. He gave vague, sometimes crooked answers. His mind was plainly set on other matters. At every sound from outside he gave a nervous start. Two or three times he rang the bell, and when a servant answered the summons he said curtly: "I didn't ring." On the third occasion he added: "Tell them to hurry with those permits. I am waiting."

Twenty minutes went by. The delay and Gorobzoff's obvious discomposure were getting on Esther's nerves. Like him she gave a start every time some sound or other rose above the muffled clatter of the typewriters. At last there came release to this unpleasant situation. There was a knock at the door and a man came in with a bundle of papers in his hand. Esther's passport was on the top of these. The man laid the bundle down on the desk and without a word went out of the room. Gorobzoff picked up the papers and the passport, and for the next few minutes appeared to study each one of them carefully. His hands as they held the papers trembled visibly, and though the room was anything but warm, he took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead as if it were streaming.

"Here are your passport and your permits, comrade," he said at last, and pushed the lot across to Esther. "Just see that they've got all the names correctly—yours and your relatives'. And here," he added, and took an envelope from his breast pocket—this he handed

separately to Esther—"is the letter which the chief wrote out specially for you. You will present it in Moscow to the person to whom it is addressed. He is a highly placed official in the Commissariat for the Interior, and a personal friend of the chief. He will do all he can to make things easy for you on your voyage to the provinces."

Esther took the envelope. It was not gummed down.

"May I read it?" she asked.

"Of course," was the reply.

She read the letter through, put it back in its envelope and the envelope into her handbag. She then rose and stretched her daintily gloved hand over the desk to her accommodating friend.

"All I can do now, comrade," she said with a winning smile and friendly tone of voice, "is to thank you from the bottom of my heart for all that you have done for me. And I would like you, if you will, to convey my warmest thanks also to your chief. I don't know if I shall ever come back from Russia—it is partly my country, you see—but if I do, it shall be my first duty, and also my pleasure, to call upon you. *Au revoir, comrade.*"

Gorobzoff took the small hand that was so engagingly held out to him. His manner had undergone a change. He still appeared ill at ease, but in a different way, and there was a look in his eyes which made Esther feel deeply thankful that the door between this private office and the outer one, where a dozen typists were at work, was of glass. Gorobzoff, holding her hand, tried to draw her closer to him. She gave a significant glance over her shoulder, indicating the glass door. He drew a deep sigh and, stooping, kissed the small gloved hand.

The wad of notes still reposèd enticingly under the paper-weight. Gorobzoff never once looked at it.

He rang the bell, and Esther Curryer was ceremoniously escorted out of the room. Once the

other side of the glass door she gave a backward glance. The wad of notes still reposed under the paper-weight. Gorobzoff had not picked them up. At the moment he was wiping his forehead and the back of his neck with his handkerchief. Esther couldn't help smiling to herself. Bolsheviks, she thought, were so very human.

A uniformed official now conducted her to the top of the stairs. The first stage in her proposed Odyssey was ended. She went down the stairs with a springy step, hugging her handbag with its precious papers close to her heart. She felt like breaking into song—into a pæan of joy, the refrain of which would be: "I am going to Russia. I am going to see Johnnie!"

SIR MIGUEL

CHAPTER XXIV

ESTHER came to the bottom of the stairs. In the hall, between her and the front door, there were several people, men and women, some with children, and all poorly clad. A uniformed official stood by directing them to the passport office and answering the many questions that were being put to him. In among that small crowd Esther noticed one man who looked different to the others, for he was smartly dressed. She couldn't see his face for he had his hat on and was walking with head bent. He didn't stop to speak to the uniformed official as all the others did, but pushed his way through to the bottom of the stairs and suddenly looked up. Seeing Esther he took off his hat. She gave a quick cry of surprise. It was Nowell Ffoulkes. Nowell, but somehow different. He, who

was always cheerful, smiling, pleasantly ironical, looked not only spiritless but seriously troubled, looked older, too, and not in the best of health.

"Nowell!" Esther exclaimed, "is it really you?" Something of his old smile chased away for the moment the pensive look in his eyes.

"Apparently," he said lightly. "How are you, Esther?"

"Oh, very well."

"And what are you doing here, may I ask?"

"I might ask the same of you."

"I have a bit of business to see to with one of those fellows upstairs. But you?"

"It's just a question of a visa," she said, with a certain amount of hesitation.

"You are not going to Russia, are you?" he queried, still speaking quite lightly.

She had come down into the hall, and instinctively they had both made their way to a recess where they were free from the crowd. To Nowell's last question Esther had only made vague answer:

"We are going on a motor tour, you know . . . on the Continent . . . possibly to Russia . . . and so . . ."

"Of course," he said quietly, "your honeymoon. . . . I was forgetting for the moment."

"Nowell!" the girl cried impulsively, "why are you being so strange? And so unkind?"

"Unkind! To you?"

"To me."

"Unkind!" he reiterated. "Great God! But why 'strange'?"

"You don't answer my letters. You are in England and you never come near me. . . . And you promised—"

"I didn't promise. I swore that if you wanted me I should be there. But whenever I had news about you you were always on the eve of your marriage. You can't have wanted me then."

Something inside her whispered: "I did want you,"

but the words never reached her lips. Perhaps a feeling of pride or even resentment kept them back. What a strange thing it is in life that this so-called "pride" so often stands in the way of friendship and of love, when a word spoken at the right moment would open wide the doors for complete understanding! If Esther had spoken those four little words what an amount of suffering she would have been spared—suffering and anxiety which nearly wrecked her own life, and not only hers but Johnnie's and Nowell's, the two men she loved best in the world. But all she now said was a reproachful:

"You were in England and never came near me."

"I was in Scotland most of the time."

"Yes, I know. You are Sir Nowell Ffoulkes now. What a terrible thing that accident was! I wrote you a letter of sympathy first, and of best wishes afterwards. I only had one answer of curt thanks."

"I was abroad when your second letter came."

"In Russia?"

"What makes you ask that?" he countered. "I was in Russia, as a matter of fact. But what made you ask?"

"Someone—I forget who—told me that your uncle owned valuable property—copper mines, is it?—out there, and that you had gone to Russia on business. In May, wasn't it? And then, meeting you here . . ."

"I see."

"You are a rich man now, Nowell," she concluded with a wistful little sigh.

He made no reply to that. That wistful sigh expressed an infinity of futile regrets. If all that—the accident, his inheritance—had come about a few months earlier what a world of difference it would have made in both their lives! Both were conscious of this: each knew what the other thought.

Neither spoke, for what was there to say? There followed a strained silence between them. Esther felt

as if her heart was about to break. She felt suddenly physically ill. The tension, that ominous silence, appeared like a doom that was hanging over her. She was on the verge of breaking down. Oh, why didn't Nowell speak? Why didn't he just take her in his arms before all this crowd and whisper into her ear those words of love, so tender and so convincing, of which in the past he seemed to hold the secret? But he remained silent, almost motionless. Men were so undemonstrative, she thought, with a bitter pang of disappointment. Is it because they do not love as women do—with an all-absorbing feeling that makes them forget themselves, their surroundings, those awful conventions of breeding and manners that hold them fast and paralyse their actions?

An aching sob rose to the girl's throat. Yes! Nowell loved her. She did not doubt that. Trust a woman for gauging a man's feelings towards her by the mere inflexion of his voice, by one glance, or the mere pressure of his hand. Her troth was plighted to Miguel Alvalho now, and Nowell loved her as he had always done, with a love just a little less dominating than his pride and his manly sense of what was fitting and proper for a gentleman to do or to leave undone. Oh! the irony of that manly sense. How many women in the world had suffered because of it! How many lives had it irretrievably wrecked! Hers, for one, so she thought.

But now she felt that she could not endure being near him any longer. Part from him she must, and the anticipation of this parting that was inevitable was more than she could bear. She made a movement to go, and at once he turned and made a way for her through the

The front door of the house was wide open. People still came and went. To Esther they seemed like shadows, dream creatures that did not really exist. Only Nowell existed. And the only real things were his coolness and his self-control.

She stepped out into the street. He asked casually: "Have you got your car?"

She replied: "No, I am walking," paused for a few seconds, and then said equally casually: "Good-bye, Nowell."

She didn't wait for the answering "Good-bye," but walked rapidly up the street, trying vainly to swallow that awful, aching sob. Nowell loved her, yes, but not as she wanted to be loved. Womanlike, she had longed to see him less master of himself, less a slave to convention. It was stupid of her, of course, and unreasonable, but what she had longed for during these last few moments of intimacy was for one word of overpowering emotion from him, for one gesture of uncontrolled passion; and because he did not love her as she wanted to be loved, her wounded pride would not allow her to put her trust in him, to speak to him freely about Johnnie and her journey to Russia, and the deception which she was practising on Miguel. If Nowell did not love her as she wanted to be loved, fearlessly and unrestrained by any convention, then he would surely frown upon her project as Miguel would certainly do; like him, he would try and dissuade her with honeyed words and specious phrases from undertaking so hazardous a voyage. He might even—God help her!—be in a position to put obstacles in her way as Miguel would do if he had the chance, or Lord Ralstane. No, no! Better hold her tongue than take such a risk; better keep within herself the words: "I did want you," which at one time rose to her lips. There was just the fear that he would not understand.

And that is how that wretched misunderstanding occurred, and why these two parted on the doorstep of Belgrave House—Esther with a heavy heart and tear-filled eyes, and Nowell with bitter disappointment and that agonising question which so many lovers have asked themselves in vain: "Why won't she trust me?"

And inside his brain conjectures went round and round.

"There is something she almost told me, but didn't quite. What is it? Who is it? Miguel? Her father? Or . . . Johnnie? I wonder now."

He stood in the doorway of Belgrave House, watching Esther's slim figure walking away briskly until she turned the corner into Eaton Place. Away, always away!

"I wonder now," he reiterated to himself; turned and went up the stairs. The thoughtful, troubled look had come back to his eyes.

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IN a back room of the municipal building in Uskenpol two men sat talking and smoking cigarettes. The room had two doors, one facing the other. It was poorly furnished: chairs, a centre table which served as a desk, and an iron stove, red hot, with a roaring fire in it, which would have made the place insufferable to anyone except to natives. High up on the white-washed wall a clock ticked on leisurely. The table was littered with papers and various objects required for writing: an inkstand, a tray with pens and pencils, a soiled blotting-pad. Both the men had a mop of hair that looked as if it hadn't come in contact with a comb for days. One was fair, had a thin, hatchet face, thin lips, a sharp nose and a furtive glance in his pale eyes. The other was dark; his hair and rough tousled beard were plentifully sprinkled with grey. Both wore thick coats in spite of the heat, and baggy trousers tucked into high leather boots. The fair man looked considerably younger than his companion, whose subordinate he appeared to be.

"You really think," the older man asked, after what had been a few moments' silence between the two of them, "you really think that this woman is his sister?"

"Yes, comrade, I do," the other replied. He had what looked like a foreign passport in his hands, and was turning over its leaves.

"I don't know much about English names," he went on, and threw the passport down on the table, "but this one seems rather unusual to me. Curryer . . . It

would be a strange coincidence if the two were not related."

"Quite so. And what did you do about it, Ivan Grigorovitch?"

"Just what I told you, comrade. The woman was evidently very anxious to go to Ufelgrad right away. People called Rabrinski live there, and they seem to be near relations of this Curryer girl, and we must presume of the prisoner also."

"By the way," the older man broke in abruptly, "we shall have to look into the dossier of these Rabrinskis. I don't like this English connection. It reeks of capitalism. But go on," he resumed. "You were saying . . .?"

"I told the woman that we could not allow her to continue her journey as far as Ufelgrad without examining her passport. She asked why this couldn't be done at once, and I told her that the examination must be done by the police administrator of the district, who happens to be absent for a few days."

"What did she say?"

"That she could not possibly spend a few days here in Uskenpol all alone. By the way, she speaks Russian like a native."

"How is that?"

"A Russian mother, by name Andrieff, now dead; sister of the Rabrinski at Ufelgrad."

"More capitalist connections!" barked rather than said the Chief Administrator of the district, Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff, and spat on the ground to express his contempt for the hated moneyed class. Then as his subordinate remained silent, waiting for the wrath of his chief to cool down a little, the latter said impatiently:

"Well? And what about the woman? What else did she say?"

"Nothing much. She is a good-looking girl, comrade, and I quite saw her reason for not liking to stay in an *isba* here all alone."

A scornful "Bah!" was the chief's comment on his junior's remark, after which he barked out another impatient "Well?"

"She begged me to allow her to go at once to her aunt, and I told her that it was not in my power to give her this permission unless she left her passport with me. She hesitated for a long time about that, but in the end she gave me the passport, and here it is."

"Very good, very good!" the chief condescended to say. He picked up the passport and turned over its leaves.

"And she has gone?" he asked after a time.

"Yes. She hired a motor car from Golouzow's garage and drove off an hour ago."

"Who drove the car?"

"I don't know the man. I asked Golouzow, who didn't know him beyond the fact that he came in an old Citroën a couple of days ago and garaged the car with him. But you know what Golouzow is. He is none too particular about the men he employs, but this fellow, he was quite sure, was all right. His papers were in order, and the tale he told was plausible enough. He also knew this place Ufelgrad, which none of the other men did. And so . . ."

The young man gave a shrug of indifference.

"We can easily follow the matter up when he comes back . . . or even if he doesn't," he said.

"Did the woman ask when she could have her passport back?"

"Of course."

"And what did you say?"

"That she could have it back as soon as you returned, which would be in about a week."

"Well? And . . .?"

"She said she would come over from Ufelgrad a week from to-day and hoped that you would have returned by then."

The Administrator said nothing more after that. He thrust Esther's passport into the drawer of the

table, and continued for a time to smoke in silence. The matter was now allowed to drop. The younger man rose, went out of the room and came back again, at first only as far as the door, from whence he asked his chief: "Do you want me again, comrade?" The other said curtly: "Yes. Come in." And when his subordinate was once more seated at the table opposite to him he resumed:

"And now, Ivan Grigorovitch, what about the prisoner?"

"As I told you, comrade," the other replied with a sigh of weariness and impatience, "I have questioned him again. I spent over four hours with him yesterday," he added dolefully.

"And you've got nothing more out of him?"

"Nothing."

"You must be more . . . insistent, comrade."

"I do my best," the other retorted fretfully. "I am worn out with all these interrogations."

"And you've got no further?"

"No."

"That's queer. What does the fellow say exactly?"

"That he is English, that he is travelling for a motion-picture business, and that he has taken photographs for purposes of a film, the scenario of which he had written and submitted to the Chief Commissar for Propaganda, who has approved of it."

"And all this happens to be true?"

"Yes. It does."

"What made you suspect him originally?"

"I had information from Astrakhan. This fellow Curryer, who is supposed to be a traveller for a motion-picture business, was in Astrakhan on the day when that Greek ship *Ambrosios* was due in last spring with a cargo of carpets. He was seen by our people hanging about in the port all day, and part of the next, when the ship actually put in. He had a long conversation with the skipper in the course of the evening. All this was reported to me in due course. Now, as you

know, the *Ambrosios* skipper, Nikotis, is under suspicion of being in direct communication with England."

"Of course, I know that. But it has been impossible so far to detain him. We have never caught him red-handed, and we don't want a quarrel with the Greeks just now."

"Quite so. But you can trust our fellows in Astrakhan. They are always on the watch. You were not expected to take up duty for at least another couple of months, so I took it on myself to put two of our specials on duty there and to keep a special eye on Nikotis and his doings. The first inkling I had of something suspicious was when Curryer applied to me here for a travelling permit to Astrakhan. This was at the end of July and I knew that the *Ambrosios* was due in at Astrakhan on the last day of the month. So I thought that by far the best thing I could do was to have the man arrested. This was done. He was searched, and all the photographs which you have seen were found on him."

"Including the photo of the ex-tyrant?"

"Yes."

"What was Curryer's explanation of that?"

"He told me the story of his film scenario, and that it had been submitted to the Chief Commissar for Propaganda and had been approved. I ordered his detention and sent a wire to Moscow asking for confirmation of the story. And I got the confirmation a fortnight later—you know, they don't hurry themselves over there."

"I know they don't," the chief retorted dryly. "You didn't say anything about the photo of the ex-tyrant then?"

"No. I preferred to wait about that till you came back. The whole thing might turn out to be a conspiracy of the first magnitude, and I thought you and I might as well have the credit of having been the first to discover it."

At the words "you and I" a scowl had come over

the chief's face. He cast a sardonic glance on his subordinate, and there was a look in his deep-set eyes which seemed to warn this presumptuous young man that if credit or honours were to be distributed as a reward for this business, there would be no question of equal sharing in the good fortune; but for the moment he apparently preferred to say nothing. He pulled open the table drawer and took out of it a small Kodak photograph on which he fixed his eyes with rapt attention, and while he gazed he kept on murmuring to himself: "No! it can't be. It can't be! This must be an impostor," he went on, still looking down on the photo. "The tyrant and all his brood were executed at Yekaterinburg four years ago. Moscow has all the authenticated reports of their death and burial. The facts were attested by the military authorities. There is no question about it. And yet——"

"I told you that the prisoner insists," broke in the younger man, "that it is a snapshot of the King of England."

"Why should he go travelling about with a snapshot of the King of England in his pocket?" the Commissar retorted with what sounded very like a snarl.

"All that will have to be gone into by yourself, comrade," the assistant countered drearily, for he was tired, very tired: his eyes had nearly disappeared within their sockets through sheer sleeplessness and worry over this affair.

But the Administrator himself was not tired. The matter of that English fellow Curryer, and of this photograph, which so resembled the ex-tyrant and yet couldn't be he, both intrigued and excited him. He had a vague hope that promotion was looming ahead, and if the business did turn out to be serious, a good reward would certainly come his way. He was wholly indifferent to his subordinate's discomfort and fatigue. There would be a great deal of work to be done, a great deal more fatigue to endure over this affair. The English were a funny lot. They were always meddling

in things that did not concern them, and trying to dictate to other nations of the world just what they should do, and how they should allow themselves to be governed. The Administrator was fully aware of the many rumours that had been going on for the past two years: that the ex-tyrant was still alive and was trying to stir up trouble among the tribes and the *moujiks* of this outlying part of Russia, even, so the Administrator had been made to understand, among the treacherous Cossacks of the Don. But the central authorities in Moscow had offered nothing but scorn to these rumours, and it was only at the beginning of this month that they decided to recall the former Police Administrator of the district and to send him, Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff, out here with orders to keep a strict eye and a repressive hand on any truth there might be in those fantastic rumours.

After a time, muttering a curse or two, he threw the photograph back into the table drawer. He rose and began pacing up and down the room, his head bent down to his chest, his hands clasped behind his back. Presently he said:

"I'd like to have another look at this Curryer fellow. Send for him, will you, comrade?"

The young man drew a deep sigh of relief. Thank his stars he was not being ordered to carry on another interminable examination of that accursed English prisoner. He was ripe for a nervous breakdown as it was. He rose and went to give the necessary orders. The chief sat down again at the table, tidied up the litter of papers and weighted them down with a rough piece of granite.

A few minutes went by: five, perhaps ten. The Administrator of Police sat smoking with the stolidity peculiar to the people of this country, accustomed to be kept waiting for things or events which were invariably late.

Presently there came the sound of the tramp of heavy feet outside; the door was thrown open, a couple

of soldiers in shabby, very untidy uniforms, ushered in Ivan Grigorovitch, who was inspector of police under the Chief Administrator, and another young man—John Curryer. The soldiers retired, and the door was closed behind them. The Chief Administrator indicated to the prisoner that he might sit down, which Johnnie did, while the inspector took a seat beside him. Johnnie looked just what he was: tired and unshaved, pale from confinement in a narrow room, and with eyes sunk from sleeplessness. His loving sister would have noted all that at a glance, but to a casual observer who did not know him very well he would have appeared much as usual, except for the shaggy fair beard which did not suit him, and his rather tousled hair which he had always worn very short and trim. Otherwise he seemed quite cheerful, moved with alacrity, and sat down as if for a pleasant conversation on social topics with the Administrator of Police and his subordinate, the inspector. His cheerfulness was at once enhanced by the offer of a cigarette, which he accepted and lit with obvious satisfaction.

He smoked on in silence for a few moments, and bore himself quite jauntily under the scrutinizing, obviously inimical glance of the two officials.

Johnnie hated the Administrator. He had only seen him once, a day or two before, when he was told by the inspector that the new chief had arrived to take up his duties and desired to see him. The interview only lasted a couple of minutes—quite long enough for Johnnie to look upon the man with absolute loathing. He hated the fellow's coarse hands with the spatulate fingers; he loathed his voice, which was more like a dog's bark than a human utterance. He hated him from the first, long before he had set eyes on him, when he was told that his arrest was by order of the Chief Administrator of Police who had not yet arrived, but was expected to take up duty very shortly. Well! the brute did not take up duty for weeks and weeks after that, and in the meanwhile Johnnie was kept—still

presumably by his orders—in a room nine feet by twelve, with an unglazed window less than eight inches square, set high up close to the ceiling, which, during the hot days of August and early September, let in clouds of evil-smelling dust, and since then gave every kind of cold draught free play. Here he had been kept for what he reckoned must be close on two months, though he had actually lost count of time. Day followed day in wearying monotony, broken only by equally wearying, interminable hours spent in the office of a young man with a Pecksniffian face, a dictatorial manner, dirty finger-nails and a mop of fair hair. Here for hours on end he was asked questions, one after the other, all tending the same way—to incriminate himself and reveal the whereabouts of the ex-Tsar. Questions were put to him over and over again about his journeyings in the country of the steppes, the purpose of his visit to Astrakhan, and of his conversation with the skipper of the Greek ship, and the meaning of the photographs found in his possession, especially the one representing a bearded, thin-faced man sitting in a high-backed chair and propped up with cushions and, in the picture, greatly resembling the ex-tyrant who had at one time been called Nikolas II, Tsar of Russia. Well! Johnnie certainly had taken that photograph, and up to the moment of his arrest had been very pleased with himself for having received gracious permission to take it. It was all due to Vera, little Vera Leonow, that he got this permission. She seemed to be in constant and devoted attendance on the ex-Tsar, who certainly looked very ill. The sight of Vera in the house of Patchenko at Varnakieff had been the greatest surprise Johnnie had ever experienced in all his life. Little Vera, who had run about as a child at his aunt's place at Ufelgrad, where her father was coachman and her mother worked in the kitchen! Little Vera! How did she come to be here in Patchenko's house and in attendance on the Tsar? She told him the full story, the full, terrible, tragic story, while she sat

beside him, dry-eyed, her trembling little hand seeking comfort in his.

Tragic story! "My God!" thought Johnnie, "has there ever been a more tragic one?" And when later on in the day Vera obtained for him the privilege of a personal interview with the Tsar and permission to take the photograph, Johnnie, looking on the emaciated form of this once mighty Emperor, had the inkling that there was further tragedy to come.

As for himself, misfortune dogged his footsteps from the moment when he left Varnakieff forty-eight hours after his arrival there for the purpose of making his way to Astrakhan as quickly as possible. Time was getting on. This was the 18th of July and the *Ambrosios* was due in port on the 30th. Johnnie made his way to Ufa, where he hoped to pick up some sort of car, however dilapidated, to take him across country. There was not one to be had, nor was there a train due for Samara for another twenty-four hours; Johnnie, perforce, had to wait for it. He knew that at Samara he could pick up another train which, though certainly late and terribly slow, would land him in Astrakhan in plenty of time for the 30th; but on arrival at Uskenpol, the junction midway between Ufa and Samara, all the passengers were turned out of the train. It transpired that there was a breakdown on the line some fifty versts higher up and no one seemed to know how soon the line would be clear again. In spite of this *contre-temps*, however, Johnnie had still ten days to spare. Unfortunately, his travelling permit had been endorsed a few days ago at Uskenpol for travelling backwards and forwards between Ufa and Samara only, with no mention of Astrakhan. The questions that now presented themselves were: should he hire a *tarantass* and go jolting over seven hundred miles of steppes with every risk of not arriving at Astrakhan in time to meet the Greek ship; or should he take his chance, here in Uskenpol, of getting the endorsement on his travelling permit cancelled and obtaining a fresh one

for Astrakhan? Or, again, should he wait until the line to Samara was clear and get his permit there, where they had granted him one originally, when first he started on his wanderings, and where the local Administrator had appeared friendly? On the whole he thought this last course the most promising one. He waited three days, then four, then five, in an evil-smelling, vermin-infested *isba*; but to every enquiry he made the answer was invariably the same: there was no news; it was impossible to say when the line would be cleared.

In Russia time never seems to be of any account. To Johnnie, under the circumstances, it meant the success or failure of his enterprise; everything with regard to it was dependent on his sending news to England, and receiving instructions if any had been sent. He could not now get to Astrakhan before the 30th except by train, so he gave up waiting for the one to Samara and applied to the Police Commissariat at Uskenpol for a permit to travel to Astrakhan. The result of this was his arrest, perquisition, and the seizure of all his photographs. He had kept these in a wallet next his skin, but he was stripped and confronted with the snapshot which he had taken of the ex-Tsar outside Patchenko's house. With great presence of mind he declared it to be a small photograph which he had of the King of England; George V and Nikolas II were first cousins, and as like one to the other as twins. Of course he was not believed. And since then his life had become a hell, with questionings and cross-examinations, with foul air and filthy food. At first he had thought of his arrest and detention as an adventure, an unpleasant one certainly, but one that would end some day when these Bolshevik blighters were sick of him and realised that nothing more could be got by asking him silly questions. He knew better now.

This second interview with the Administrator was also of short duration. The latter made him repeat on oath that the snapshot was one of the King of England.

Johnnie called himself a dirty perjurer but he swore it on his oath, nevertheless. After that the Administrator shifted his ground. He asked Johnnie questions about his relations.

"Comrade Rabrinski is your aunt, I understand?" he began.

"Yes!" Johnnie replied after a moment's hesitation, for he did not recognise his aunt, the Princess Rabrinski, under the Bolshevik appellation. "Yes, she is," he reiterated, nodding.

"And you have other relations at . . . what is the name of the place?"

"Ufelgrad. Yes, there are my cousins, two daughters of the Princess."

"'Comrade,' we say in Russia," the Commissar warned him sternly.

"I meant 'Comrade,'" Johnnie rejoined lightly; "the other word escaped me. I have been used to it all my life."

"You will find it to your advantage to forget it," the other retorted dryly.

There was a momentary pause. Silence, broken only by the monotonous ticking of the white-faced clock up on the wall. The sound got on Johnnie's nerves. He had finished his cigarette and was longing for another; but he was not offered one. He had been asked so many questions and had answered them so uniformly that he wondered why this loathsome fellow with the dirty, coarse hands and scowling face, kept him here hanging about. Then at last the Commissar spoke:

"Have you any other relative in Russia?" he asked.

"I had; but I don't know where any of them are. They may all be dead for aught I know."

"Quite likely," the other assented dryly. "Have you any in England?"

Johnnie jibbed at that. He didn't so much mind ill-treatment, but he couldn't stand impudence, and this was impudence. So he frowned and said nothing,

whereupon the Administrator brought his heavy fist down with such a crash on the table that everything on it rattled, and poor nerve-racked Johnnie gave an involuntary jump.

"I asked you," the Commissar barked at him, "if you have any relatives in England."

"I heard you. But I don't see—"

"Never mind what you see and don't see. Answer my question."

Johnnie was ready with an answer. What was the use of quarrelling with these brutes? They had him on toast, anyhow.

"My father is still alive," he said reluctantly.

"Anyone else?"

But before Johnnie could frame a reply to that—he hated the idea of mentioning Esther's name before these brutes—the Administrator had opened the table drawer, taken out of it what was obviously an English passport, which he now threw down in front of Johnnie. The leaves flew open. Johnnie looked down on the passport and was confronted with Esther's name, her photograph and her signature. Esther! What in Heaven's name did it all mean? For a few moments he didn't know. He couldn't guess. Esther! Here! Impossible! A kind of dark vapour seemed to envelop his brain. Through it he tried to see daylight. And all at once the truth dawned upon him. He guessed. He knew. Esther, God bless her, had come to get him out of this miserable predicament. And she would succeed, too. There was nothing Esther could not accomplish if she set her mind to it.

Something of this new train of thought must have been reflected on Johnnie's face as he looked down on the small photograph of his beloved sister. Certain it is that the Administrator was apparently satisfied that his surmises were correct. He wanted no further confirmation. Obviously this woman, Esther Curryer, was the prisoner's sister. Equally obviously she had come out here to try and get him back to England.

Well, she would be a useful pawn in the game which he, Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff, Administrator of Police of this district, proposed to have with these meddlesome English. He had not yet thought out all the movements he proposed to make in the game, but they were going to be very amusing and very profitable from a promotion point of view.

But for the moment, nothing. Silence as to future plans while this young fool wore himself out with hopes and disappointments. All that the Administrator now said, and he said it quite casually as if the matter was of very little importance, was:

"The owner of this passport will be coming here to claim it in a few days. You shall see her then."

At which announcement Johnnie forgot all his hatred of this fellow, his loathing of his dirty hands and spatulate fingers; even his voice sounded melodious when it gave promise of Esther being soon here. Johnnie, in fact, was ready to grasp those coarse, dirty hands in friendship and gratitude. The object of his hatred had suddenly become a friend, a harbinger of the best news in the world. He even failed to notice the curt way in which he was presently being dismissed and the unceremonious manner of his exit between two soldiers, who marched him along the corridor back to his narrow, evil-smelling prison, with the draughty window and hard, uncomfortable bed.

Esther was here! God bless her! Nothing could go wrong now, and everything was for the best in the best possible world.

THE RABRINSKIS

CHAPTER XXVI

To Esther Curryer the drive in a dilapidated Citroën car from Uskenpol to her aunt's country place—a matter of eighty-odd miles, never seemed real. She must have been in a sort of trance, so she thought afterwards, during the whole of the way. It was in a kind of dreamlike state that she was aware at one moment of a clover field—the scent was so delicious—at others of villages with low whitewashed houses, that had thatched roofs and green shutters; and on one occasion of a wayside *isba* outside which men and women were sitting, drinking. Here the chauffeur drew up and went inside with his empty petrol-cans to get them refilled. While this went on and until he came back, Esther remained huddled up inside the car. The women and some of the men left their drinks and came across to stare at the car and at her. Some stood up on the footboard and unashamedly glued their noses against the window. Esther was thankful when a fresh start was made.

And all along the way there was mud, gluey, sticky mud, that bespattered the car, and even contrived to find its way into the interior, covering her dress, her hat and her shoes with yellow, sticky dabs. Every now and then the car would come to a standstill, the chauffeur would get down and presumably clear the tyres of some of the mud. But Esther didn't really know that this happened: she only vaguely remembered it all afterwards. She remembered seeing the chauffeur through the grimy window bending down to the wheels, and his face as he straightened himself out before he returned to the driving-seat. His face! What an ugly one it was. She did remember that, because she saw

the man again later on at Ufelgrad. On the way, all she noticed was that he had only one eye. The other was all disfigured somehow with a wide red streak cutting across the eyebrow, which gave him a sinister expression. In an ordinary way Esther, finding herself alone on the high road in an unknown country, might have felt a slight pang of fear. But not so during this drive, when her mind was so absorbed in thoughts of the future that the present, with all its happenings and vicissitudes, and even dangers, was simply non-existent.

The most important of these thoughts was, of course, about Johnnie and all the plans which she had already made for getting in touch with him. It was going to be difficult, terribly difficult, far more so than in her hopeful fit of enthusiasm she had anticipated. Not that her friend at Belgrave House had in any way proved to be false. He had obviously played the game from first to last. Her passport was quite in order; the permits for which she had put down a hundred pounds procured her the right to travel to Samara and thence to Ufa, and even Astrakhan and all intermediate stations if she wished. She had called on the British representative in Moscow and had at once been put in touch there with Sir Watson James, who, it turned out, had travelled with brother John all the way from home and had seen him off on his journey to Samara. Sir Watson was able to tell Esther many things that she didn't know, and as many of Johnnie's plans as he had confided to him before starting on his adventures.

"Your brother's plans," he had said to her, "were first to go to Samara, then to Ufa, and from there to make his way south through the country of the Don and of the steppes to Astrakhan. The last I saw of him," Sir Watson went on, "was when I called to say good-bye and he showed me the disguise which he intended to assume during his wanderings. I gave him what counsels I could. We haven't had a word from him at the Legation from that day to this."

On the other hand, the British representative had

received a wire from Lord Ralstane which, when decoded, proved to be a short statement of the disappearance and presumed detention of one John Curryer, representative of an American cinematograph firm and last known to have been in Astrakhan on April 30th, after which he proposed to trek north again in the direction of Ufa. Lord Ralstane further begged in the wire that every effort should be made to ascertain the whereabouts of the missing man and to obtain his release, adding that no expense should be spared, the Empire Press making itself responsible for all disbursements.

"Unfortunately," Sir Watson then concluded, "we have learned by experience that in cases of this sort diplomatic channels are worse than useless. The Government up at Moscow as soon as it is approached on the subject is at once on the alert. The matter becomes for them one of international importance and the personality of the prisoner is magnified into that of a dangerous spy. Bargainings are set on foot. Delays are endless—I may say deliberately endless. The prisoner, who has perhaps only been kept in a provincial goal, is transferred to some secret place of detention to which we foreigners can never hope to have access. And there Heaven only knows what may become of him."

"I know," was Esther's only comment on this. It was because she had known all this intuitively, because she had no faith in diplomatic channels, that she had burnt her boats, been false to Miguel and taken the risk of this journey to Russia, all alone, trusting only in her wits and in her womanly tact—not to say charm—to gain her ends.

She had travelled to Samara, feeling nothing of the appalling discomforts of this interminable journey. The crowds, the dirt, the smell, the noise and endless delays at the numerous stations or on the way, remained for ever in her memory like a hideous nightmare, an

experience worthy to take its place in a revised edition of Dante's "Inferno."

The permit which she had obtained from her friend at Belgrave House enabled her to continue her journey as far as Ufa if she wished. But she didn't want to do that. She had, in the meanwhile, made up her mind to break her journey at Uskenpol, which she remembered from olden days was within a drive of Princess Rabrinski's country place. Quite apart from the fact that she had a longing to see her aunt and cousins, she cherished the hope that they might know something about Johnnie's activities or even his whereabouts. There was even the remote hope that he had been to Ufelgrad to see them, and that they knew whether he had seen the ex-Tsar, as his one and only letter to Lord Ralstane had foreshadowed.

Hope! Hope! There was always hope, which, coupled with untiring energy, helped Esther to bear every kind of discomfort and look every hint of possible danger fearlessly in the face. She had obtained permission from the Police Administrator at Uskenpol to visit her relatives, and it was with a sense of having so far triumphed over every anticipated difficulty that she stepped into the dilapidated Citroën and bargained with the one-eyed chauffeur to drive her as speedily as the state of the roads would allow to Ufelgrad. The sinister-looking chauffeur declared that he knew the way. He said that the roads were bad and thick in mud, but that he would get to Ufelgrad before noon the next day.

The next day? Esther gave a gasp. It was then three o'clock in the afternoon. Would it take more than four hours to cover eighty miles? Would it? The man only grinned and said something about doing his best. A start was made and Esther fell into the dreamlike trance from which a peremptory banging against the window, which was half-way down, presently woke her. Perhaps she had actually dropped off to sleep. She didn't know. She certainly was wide

awake now and suddenly made aware that it was getting dark.

She lowered the window right down. The chauffeur was standing close by. He said laconically:

"We have another two hours' drive before we get to Ufelgrad. I cannot do it in the dark. It is too dangerous. Better spend the night here."

Esther gave another gasp.

"Out here in the car?" she exclaimed.

"Out here," he said curtly, "but not in the car."

And while Esther was trying to get over the shock of this unpleasant prospect, the chauffeur went on: "There is no moon and the night will be dark. I will put the cushions down for you to sleep on. This is a good place; there are some trees over there and it is quiet."

Esther looked about her. The shades of evening were fast drawing in, but she could see the flat stretch of country extending to the unseen horizon.

It looked like pasture land, broken up here and there by small spinneys or clumps of birch and ash and scrubby undergrowth. Far, very far away to the right the snow-capped peaks of the Urals still held the last glimmer of fading daylight. The air was soft and absolutely still, and the prospect of sleeping under the dome of the sky did not seem so black as it had done at first. She had had very little chance of breathing the pure air of heaven since she had left home all those æons ago. She entered a protest, however, as she didn't like the idea of having her mind made up for her by this uncouth fellow.

"Why shouldn't we go on?" she argued. "You have your headlights, haven't you?"

"The way is intricate," he retorted. "No roads at all presently, only fields to cross. No signposts. It isn't safe in the dark."

He paused a moment and then added gruffly: "You are not afraid, are you?"

Esther couldn't help smiling. The man's gruffness

and his ingenuous query amused her. It was so entirely Russian. She said:

"Afraid? Of what?"

"There are no wild animals here, and no vagabonds. And if you want anything I shall be over there."

He pointed to the left and Esther turned to look that way. Some two hundred yards on in that direction a tiny light suddenly gleamed through the gathering darkness. One light, then another, then another one or two.

"Field-workers' cottages," the chauffeur remarked in his usual laconic manner. "The first one you come to, I shall be there."

"But why shouldn't I . . . ?" Esther suggested.

"They wouldn't like it. They know me and not you."

"I would pay," she hazarded.

"They wouldn't like it," was his curt retort. "You are better here."

How funny the man was, with his peremptory manner and gruff voice. Well, there was nothing for it but to accept the inevitable. She got out of the car without further argument, and the chauffeur set to to collect the cushions for the night. He carried them to a short distance where there was a small grove of trees with undergrowth. He found a convenient place under the shelter of a thicket made up of silver birch and stunted oak, and here he laid the cushions down, and over them he threw a rug which he had dragged out from under the seat of the car. When he had arranged everything he turned away and walked off without another word in the direction of the cottages, leaving his passenger to lie down or not as she pleased. Esther watched him go until the shades of evening swallowed him up. She saw him halt and light a cigarette, then continue on his way. Silence as well as darkness wrapped her round now as in an immense mantle. She glanced down on the cushions. They looked inviting, she thought, so she took off her hat

and lay down and, with a deep sigh of well-being, stretched out her cramped limbs. After that sigh she remained quite still, gazing up at the sky. It was of a deep, dark sapphire blue and it was studded with stars; she amused herself by picking out the familiar constellations: the Great Bear and the Pleiades, and—yes, she could distinguish the Milky Way quite clearly! And all the while through the silence and the gloom, faint, restful sounds came to her ears: human voices, muffled, from the distant cottages; a dog's bark; the call of a night-bird; the crackling of twigs in the undergrowth under tiny, furtive feet. Afraid? How could she be afraid? The air was so pure; the horizon so far away. Russia was so immense, so immense! Where in the midst of that limitless land would she find Johnnie?

She fell asleep.

A loud, harsh voice woke her from that delicious, restful sleep. She looked up. It was broad daylight; it took her some time to collect her senses. She couldn't think where she was. It was so like what she imagined Paradise to be, for the light was golden on the distant peaks and the softest of soft breezes from the south brought a scent of clover to her nostrils. She sat up, enjoyed a real, royal stretch and struggled to her feet.

It was the chauffeur who had roused her with a few words which she could not recollect. Probably he wanted to make an early start. She couldn't see him, but she could hear the familiar sound of a driver tinkering with his engine. She smoothed down her dress, then picked up her handbag which she had hugged to herself when first she fell asleep. It had dropped out of her hands and lay there on the ground by the side of the cushions. A pang of alarm shot through her heart. How easy it would have been for that strange, sinister-looking man to rob her. She opened the bag; the contents were untouched, and Esther felt quite ashamed of her unworthy thoughts. The Russian *moujik* has many bad qualities but he is not a thief, nor is he a liar.

Esther pulled the small hand-mirror out of her bag but put it back again quickly without looking into it. She knew that she must look a fright, but what did that matter? In two or three hours she would be at Ufelgrad and enjoying the luxury of a bath. Think of it! She put on her hat, or rather shoved it on her head anyhow, tucked a few rebellious curls under it and was ready for a start.

The second half of the journey was uneventful, but extremely uncomfortable. Esther felt herself being bumped over stony gullies and ploughed fields until she thought that every bone in her body would break. But they didn't, and when the sun was straight overhead she spied in the distance the iron gates and stone walls of Ufelgrad, which she had known when she was a child.

THE RABRINSKIS

CHAPTER XXVII

ANYONE who had known the gorgeous home of the Rabrinskis at Ufelgrad in the years before the revolution would hardly have known it now. When the jolting Citroën turned in at the monumental gates of the park Esther could not at first credit her eyes. This was not the stately park which she remembered, the pair of imposing lodges at the gate with their clock towers and ivy-covered walls, the noble avenue and vast lawns on which priceless specimen trees reared their noble heads. The lodges looked uninhabited, almost derelict, the gates hung on rusty hinges and creaked as the driver, having jumped down from the car, threw them open and, after passing through, closed them again. Of the beautiful avenue of poplars, larches and silver birch

there was scarcely anything left. A large number of the trees had been cut down. The few that were left had been stripped of their lower branches and looked like untidy mops of withering leaves. Many had been uprooted by a recent gale. None had been replaced. The lawns which in the olden days spread their magnificence over the approach to the mansion like emerald-hued velvet carpets, were now just fields of dried, overgrown hay. The specimen firs and cypresses and thuyas were all gone, and the mile-long drive was like a mountain track, stony and unswept.

And so it was with the aspect of the château itself. Devastation, neglect, dilapidations everywhere. The ironwork rusty, the woodwork broken, the plaster chipped. Statues and garden ornaments knocked off their pedestals and left lying broken on the ground. Revolution, born of resentment and lust for revenge, had passed its grim hand over this lordly abode and left behind it little more than a wilderness.

Esther, after she had passed through the gates and taken in the general devastation at a glance, would not trust herself to look again. All the way along the drive she shrank back into the corner of the car. She wouldn't look. The sight which would have met her eyes would, she guessed, have been heart-breaking. A change she had expected, of course. Vague accounts in English newspapers, garbled ones from Germany or Poland, had prepared her for it, but she had not anticipated anything quite so pathetic as this. The silence and the loneliness were almost terrifying. There was nobody about; everything was of a deathlike stillness, where in the olden days the whole place used to hum with sounds of activities: gardeners at work, stablemen going to and fro, dogs barking, horses stamping in the stable-yard. Life! life! whilst this was so like death!

Her aunt and cousins were expecting her. She

had sent a telegram already from Samara which had apparently been delivered, because as soon as the rattle of the old Citroën over the stony drive made itself heard, a breath of life seemed to animate the stillness of the mansion, and three eager, smiling faces gazed down on the approaching car from the top of the perron steps. There was a general cry of "Here she is!" And down ran the two Rabrinski girls with their mama following them more slowly. Even before the car came to a standstill, there was a rush for the footboard, the door was pulled open; there were cries of joy: "Esther! Esther! Welcome, Esther!" and Esther could not get out of the car until she had been hugged and kissed and embraced and passed from one pair of arms to the other, until she finally found comparative rest on the bosom of her aunt, the once beautiful, exquisite Princess Rabrinski, one of the most brilliant stars in the social firmament of the Tsarist Court, now a pathetic-looking old lady in a shabby coat and skirt, with untidy white hair fluttering under a scrap of black lace, thin white hands, blue-veined and trembling, and pale eyes that seemed as if they were never free of tears.

Nor was Esther dry-eyed in face of this loving welcome. What her presence here must mean to these poor, solitary women could easily be imagined. They did look terribly poor, almost indigent, with thin, wan faces that betrayed the lack of sufficient food. Their seedy coats and skirts were almost threadbare, their shoes were time-worn, and very obviously, poor dears, the two girls were deprived of all those little comforts and luxuries that are almost a necessity to young people nowadays. Their hands were rough, and there was no vestige of powder on their shiny little noses or a hint of varnish on their finger-nails. Both girls were younger than Esther, but sorrow and want made them look much older than their years.

As soon as the first wave of exuberant welcome had calmed down, Esther turned to speak to the chauffeur.

He was standing by, waiting patiently for notice to be taken of him, waiting in the manner which had become second nature with every Russian of every class.

"It is ten roubles I have to give you," Esther said to him, and she searched her bag for the money.

"You can pay me later," he countered.

"How do you mean—'later'? You are not coming back, are you?"

"No, I am not coming back. I am staying here."

"But—"

"It is quite all right, comrade. I don't want garage for my car, and I'll find a bed somewhere in the village."

Esther turned to her aunt:

"Will that be all right?" she asked.

The Princess shrugged:

"You can't force him to take the money if he doesn't want to take it," she said in English. "And you can't make him go away if he wants to stay here. We cannot control these people nowadays," she went on. "Come, darling, I'll show you your room."

She led the way up the perron steps, and Esther, after a moment's hesitation, followed her, the two cousins clinging to her with their arms round her waist. The chauffeur remained stolidly by the side of his car. Half-way up the steps the Princess looked down on him over her shoulder:

"You will find a garage over by the stable-yard," she said, "where you see that clock tower. You can put your car in there and sleep there, too, if you like."

After that no more notice was taken of the one-eyed chauffeur. The two girls giggled and one of them said: "What a funny-looking man. Where did you pick him up, Esther?" while the other one murmured: "I wonder if he is a spy."

The devastation inside the château was almost more painful to witness than on the outside. Windows broken, doors hanging loosely on their hinges, tapestries ripped from the walls, pictures slashed across and frames

smashed, cabinets, chairs, console tables—nothing but a pile of rubbish. So much for the once magnificent hall and reception-rooms on the ground floor. Esther came involuntarily to a standstill when she passed through the stately entrance door and saw before her the monumental staircase with its exquisitely carved marble balustrade, delicate as a piece of lacework, which had been photographed and written about as a perfect specimen of Russian eighteenth-century art. It was all chipped and broken now. Her aunt, seeing the look of consternation, almost of horror, in Esther's face, said quietly:

"Yes! they came here. A lot of them—a hundred, I should think. They broke everything they could lay their hands on. Fortunately they found their way down to the cellar before they thought of going to the bedroom floor. They were too drunk to do much mischief after that."

"But the servants . . . the outdoor men . . .?" Esther protested.

"Most of them ran away," the Princess said with that calm philosophy which seemed to have become habitual to her. "Others joined in with the rabble. A few—very few—tried to protect the place. They were killed."

"The Leonows?"

"They left during the War. He, of course, had to join the army. He had bought some time ago a little bit of property somewhere near Yekaterinburg, and in 'sixteen when things began to go badly he settled his wife and Vera over there. I have heard nothing of any of them since then. Leonow's regimental depot was at Yekaterinburg and I suppose he thought that he could keep in touch more easily with his womenfolk that way. He was quite right. This château was no longer a safe place to live in, as we very soon experienced."

Esther didn't say anything more. Her heart was too full of sorrow for words. Thank God, she was well provided with money and would be able, though only

in a very small measure, to alleviate some of the trouble that weighed so heavily on these three plucky women. She registered many a resolution then and there to be of assistance to them in the future, together with the earnest hope that it would be in her power to carry these resolutions through.

Princess Rabrinski and her two daughters lived on the top floor of their château, waited on by two old servants, a married couple, faithful retainers of pre-revolution days, who had remained loyal to their employers whom they had served since childhood. Neither of them had ever known any other home but the château of Ufelgrad. Here both of them were born, here they fell in love and were married, and here they intended to die. Their names were simply Stefan and Kati. They didn't seem to have any other, and their joint ages were anything between one and two hundred. Kati cooked and washed, and Stefan kept the place clean. Esther remembered seeing them both ten years ago when they looked, of course, much younger, and Kati had a lot of brown hair which she wore in two thick plaits falling down her back. Now her head was tied up in a striped cotton handkerchief tied under her chin, hiding what hair she had.

The four ladies sat down to table and Stefan brought in the soup. Esther was ravenous. She had had nothing to eat for nearly twenty-four hours. Whether the soup was good or not she didn't know. To her it tasted good and she polished off the large plateful which Stefan had put in front of her. When she had finished she looked up and saw her aunt's sad eyes fixed upon her with an expression which she dared not interpret. It almost looked like shame.

"Now you know, my dear," the old lady said softly, "why I have not asked you lately to come and pay us a visit."

Esther looked puzzled.

"But why, aunt?" she asked.

"How could we ask you to share such awful meals? That is all we have to offer. Thin soup, meagre vegetables, rye bread . . . Isn't it pitiable?"

"Please don't, darling," Esther pleaded. "You make me ashamed. I have enjoyed this lovely plate of soup more than any food I have eaten for years. And I love rye bread."

Later on Stefan brought in some tea. The Princess said:

"Stefan gets tea for us, but where he gets it from we do not know. He never says, do you, Stefan?"

"I have promised," the old man murmured.

"Isn't it terrible? It has all to be done in secret. We are not allowed to buy anything except from peasants in our district. The peasants are very good and they sell us what they can; but, of course, they cannot supply us with tea or coffee or any kind of groceries. Very occasionally we can get a lean fowl or a scrap of pig's meat. Kati tried to get something like that for you for to-day, but there was nothing to be had. Really the only luxury we have in the way of food is tea. Some kind soul in the village manages that for us. Whoever it is, we pray he may never be found out."

"Would he be punished?"

"By a fine which he couldn't pay. Imprisonment, certainly. Perhaps even . . ."

"Oh, no!" Esther exclaimed horror-struck.

Every hour that she spent with her aunt and cousins brought things to light: rules, regulations, what-nots, that were unjust, arbitrary, cruel. And somehow everything that she heard and saw brought with it the terrifying knowledge of the danger which threatened Johnnie. Up to now she had not spoken about him, nor about the ex-Tsar. She hoped presently to find out in the course of conversation how much the Princess knew about Johnnie's mission, and whether she believed that Nikolas II was still alive and was, in fact, gathering an army of loyalists round him to help him reconquer his throne.

THE RABRINSKIS

CHAPTER XXVIII

PRINCESS RABRINSKI knew nothing about Johnnie. She hadn't seen him and he had not communicated with her.

"Very wisely," she remarked. "If letters or any other communication had been intercepted it would have been the end of him, and probably of us all."

She looked dreadfully alarmed when she heard the full story of his Odyssey and its terrifying end. Esther told her everything at full length from the day when he came home after his interview with Lord Ralstane to the day when the skipper of the Greek ship sent that last ominous telegram. All the while that Esther spoke, the old lady sat with hands clasped and eyes fixed in ever-growing horror on the girl's face. From time to time she nodded and murmured: "Yes. Yes, I know," or reiterated the words: "His Majesty," and "He is very ill. Quite broken," or "Can one wonder?"

"It is quite true, then, about the Tsar being alive?" Esther queried in the end.

"Quite true, my dear. I have not seen His Majesty; your cousins and I are too closely watched for us to dare to go and pay our respects."

"But you know where he is staying?"

The old lady said: "Yes," but with obvious hesitation.

"You will tell me, won't you?" Esther urged. Then as again the Princess appeared to hesitate, she pleaded more earnestly: "I must know, Aunt dear, because of Johnnie."

"I don't see . . ."

"You must see, dear, that where the Tsar is, there they will know something about Johnnie, and until I

know where he is, I can do nothing to help him. In the name of God, aunt," the girl cried out in an agony of emotion which caused her voice to sound broken and shrill, "help me to find Johnnie! You are not going to let him die in a Bolshevik prison—are you—without lifting a finger to save him?"

"You are quite right, my dear," the Princess said without any demur this time; "and I should not have hesitated when it was a question of your dear brother's safety. Especially as I know that I can trust you as I can my own daughters. Our Emperor is resting at the moment in Varnakieff in the house of a loyal and good man named Alexei Fedorovitch Patchenko, who is the Staroshka or chieftain of the village. Varnakieff is a beautiful little place, which lies at the foot of the mountains and is actually in this province about forty miles from Ufa."

Esther echoed the name "Varnakieff" as if to impress it on her mind, and the Princess went on:

"All the peasants south of Ufa as far as Astrakhan, and all the tribesmen on the steppes, know that the Tsar, God bless him, is alive. They go on regular pilgrimages to see him and to pray for him. Only a couple of months ago there was a great gathering at Varnakieff, on the anniversary of the day when the imperial family was murdered by those devils and God saved His Majesty's life by a miracle."

"Perhaps Johnnie was there then," Esther mused, "and saw it all."

"Possibly. We only heard rumours. There are many flying about as to His Majesty's plans. Some of these rumours drift as far as this lonely house. They seem to be in the air. But we know nothing for certain."

"I have come to find Johnnie, aunt," Esther remarked simply, "and I am eternally grateful to you for making it easier for me."

"God bless you, my dear."

"I shall first go to Varnakieff. The same chauffeur

can drive me in that old Citroën. I might come across someone there who may know or have heard something of Johnnie.

"Varnakieff is a long way from here."

"How far?"

"Three hundred versts."

"How much is that?"

"About a hundred and eighty miles. You can't do it in the day and it wouldn't be safe to put up at Uskenpol."

"Why not?"

"The Government have got an Administrator of Police there now. He might make trouble."

"I don't think he will. I didn't see him when I came through, but I saw his assistant—'Inspector' they called him—who seemed quite amiable. He certainly wouldn't give me a permit to come to you unless I left my passport with him, which I did."

"My dear! you didn't?" the old lady exclaimed in obvious alarm.

"Why not? It is absolutely in order, but I was told to leave it for examination by the Administrator, who happened to be absent. I can have it back . . . Let me see . . . yesterday was Tuesday . . . yes! I am to call and fetch it next Tuesday."

"But that is madness. . . ! They'll find out by then that you are Johnnie's sister. When you call at the police station they will arrest you——"

"They wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't they? They dare anything. They defy every law of common justice and every international code."

"I am under the protection of the British Legation."

"So was Johnnie."

"Johnnie had a mission to fulfil. He was under a promise to send letters and reports to the Empire Press in England. These may have been filched from him. The first letter got through to London all right. He should have sent another one at the end of July.

He may have written it and then had it stolen. Something of the sort must certainly have happened. We don't know. Now I have done nothing compromising. My movements have been entirely above-board. Even if they did arrest me they wouldn't find a single thing on my person or in my luggage that was the least bit suspicious."

The Princess still looked deeply troubled.

"All that you say, my dear," she rejoined with a long drawn-out sigh, "is quite right; that is to say, it would be right in any country except this one. But you must remember that our beloved Russia is not sane at the present time. She is going through a period of what can rightly be called 'homicidal mania.' And what you foreigners will not realise is that you are no more safe from these madmen than we are."

"Anyway, dear," Esther said gravely, "I must take that risk. I must redeem my passport at Uskenpol and I must go on to Varnakieff, where I am convinced I can hear something definite about Johnnie. So you see . . ."

The Princess drew another deep sigh.

"So long as your going to Varnakieff," she said slowly, "does not put those devils on the track of His Majesty's whereabouts."

"Don't be worried about that, aunt," Esther hastened to assure her. "I give you my word that whatever else happens, nothing that I do will endanger your Emperor's life."

"I don't like your travelling alone, my dear; and that awful chauffeur . . ."

"The chauffeur is all right. I trust him, somehow. And he seems to know his way about the country very well."

"I know, I know. And you are very plucky, my dear; but all the same I wish we had someone here to look after you. When last we were in England, my husband and I, just before the War, there was that nice

Nowell Ffoulkes. You were a child then and he was just a boy, but I made sure that you two would get married some day. Why didn't you?"

"That is a long story, aunt," Esther replied with a short sigh. "I will tell you about all that before I leave."

"You are not going to marry him?"

"No."

"There is someone else?"

"Yes. I am engaged to be married. If there hadn't been this trouble about Johnnie I should have been married by now."

"My dear!" the Princess exclaimed with that joyful eagerness which women always display when marriage and giving in marriage are spoken of. "Do tell me. Who is it?"

"A man who is kindness and generosity itself. He has been wonderfully good to us all. To my father, to Johnnie and to me. We are all immensely grateful to him."

"But his name, my dear?"

"Sir Miguel Alvalho."

"You do not love him, Esther," the old lady sighed.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I am an old woman who was young once, and I know that one does not talk of gratitude when one loves."

Esther made no remark on this. How well she knew that the old lady was right: one does not talk of gratitude when one loves.

After a minute or two of silence the Princess resumed: "You should have married Sir Miguel, my dear," she said earnestly, "before you came out here. You could then have come out together, which would have been so much better than wandering about this wretched country by yourself. And, mind you, as your husband he could have done so much more for Johnnie than you can."

Esther shook her head gravely.

"He would never have let me come to Russia."

"Why not?"

"He hates Russia and my connection with Russia. As a married woman I couldn't very well have come out here against his wish, could I?"

"No," the Princess admitted. "As a matter of fact, I wonder that Lord Frederick allowed you to come like this all alone."

"Poor father!" Esther answered with a doleful little sigh.

"Why do you say that? Your dear father isn't ill, is he?"

"No, he has been ill, but he is quite well again now. As a matter of fact," Esther went on with sudden resolution, "Father knows nothing about my coming out here. Sir Miguel doesn't know, either. Nobody knows. They would only have tried to hinder me. And I was determined to come."

At this unexpected display of what she would call "unfeminine self-reliance," the old-fashioned Princess was absolutely aghast. She couldn't find the words wherewith to express her horror that a niece of hers, her dead sister's own daughter, should thus throw all restraint to the winds. All she could do was to murmur: "My dear!" and again: "My dear, my dear!" in a tone that implied reproach, sorrow, alarm and many other emotions besides including deep affection.

The two ladies had been sitting together in the one cosy little room of which the devastated château could boast. Here after the invasion of her home by hoards of revolutionists intent on pillage, the Princess had assembled the few little bits of furniture that had escaped destruction, and here she spent her days thinking over the past, not daring to look into the future. Here she sat alone while her daughters helped Kati with the housework, or busied themselves along with Stefan in the little bit of garden round the house,

digging, hoeing, raising vegetables and growing a few flowers.

As she told Esther on a later occasion, the only two things in life that gave her respite from thoughts of regret for the past and of terror for the future were needlework and prayer. Like nearly all Russians she was very devout. In pre-War days there was a private chaplain attached to the Rabrinski household, and ornate orthodox services were held in the chapel of the château. But all that was a thing of the past, as was everything that had once made life beautiful and happy. Flowers, birds, pet dogs, horses and books. Yes! there were still a few books left out of the wreckage—books that had been pulled out of their bindings, torn up page by page, and thrown together into a heap ready to be burned. But as it happened, fire was not set to the heap. It lay for days and days in the hall with dust and dirt settling down upon it, while the Princess and her girls and the two faithful servants shut themselves up in the few rooms upstairs, hardly able to think or eat or sleep. Then, presently, the reaction came, the clinging to the last shred of hope, the instinctive clinging to life. The old lady and her daughters tried to pick up the ravelled threads of their tangled existence. The Princess turned to her ikons and her prayer-book, and Kati and Stefan to house-work, and the two girls, who had always been voracious readers, as schoolgirls are apt to be, turned back to their books.

With an infinity of patience and perseverance they laid siege to that pathetic heap of papers in the hall. It was almost mountainous, but they tackled the difficult business with an enthusiasm that made them forget while they worked the awful experience of that one terrible day. Piece by piece they sorted out the bindings and the torn pages, collected them, docketed them, assembled them, until they succeeded in putting together close on two hundred books. It took the girls four years to do it, and the task was not yet

completed. But now they had books, old books, books that they had read before, but books that were companions on long winter evenings when, short of fuel and wrapped in rugs, they sat together and turned over the reassembled pages of the good old tomes. Surely this is one of the most wonderful examples of tenacity of purpose and of pluck ever displayed for love of those staunch and lasting friends—one's books.

BOOK VI

NOWELL

A
Gulam Rasool
F.A. Student of S.P.
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(30)

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NOWELL

CHAPTER XXIX

THUS time went by and day followed day in peaceful monotony, and presently Monday evening came along: a gloomy, oppressive evening it was with the tang of decaying leaves and of tired Nature in the air. The bare branches of the trees quivered under the lash of the south-westerly wind, and banks of heavy clouds sweeping across the sky presaged the coming storm. Twilight was slowly fading into night, spreading its dark grey mantle over the distant heights. From time to time flashes of steely light threw a momentary gleam over the horizon far away, and dull prolonged rumblings foretold the approach of thunder.

Esther, feeling all on edge, wandered out into the park. She made her way down the avenue, where she hoped that the solitude and darkness would prove a solace to her perturbed spirits. The swish of dead leaves under her footsteps made a soothing accompaniment to her thoughts. This was Monday. There were only a few hours to get through before she was due at Uskenpol, there to redeem her passport. Uskenpol! the first stage of her quest in search of Johnnie. After that Varnakieff. It was eleven days now since she left London: eleven days, during which Johnnie was perhaps lingering in a pestilential Russian prison, suffering both physically and mentally, without news and slowly giving up hope. Varnakieff was now her objective. She had a plan ready for the journey, for going from Uskenpol to Varnakieff by a way that would mislead the police and their organisation of spies. The Princess had shown grave concern over this: she feared more for

the safety of the Tsar than for that of her niece; but Esther, with that self-reliance which was the keynote of her character, was quite sure in her own mind that nothing that she would do would endanger that precious life, and her aunt's reiterated warnings and admonitions only aroused her to impatient retorts.

"I am going, aunt, I am going," she repeated again and again on this Monday evening.

"But not alone—with that hideous chauffeur, my dear," the old lady urged with tear-filled eyes.

"I shan't look at him more than I can help," Esther retorted. "And, anyhow, there's no one else."

"You must admit, dear, that his ways are very strange. I call them suspicious."

"Why suspicious? He brought me here quite safely, and he has been here ever since. He may be a rough-looking fellow, but I'm sure he is honest."

"He may be a spy."

"Impossible. People of that class haven't the brains for that. He is just an ignorant lout."

"Have you ever had a good look at him?"

Esther couldn't help laughing.

"I can't say that I have," she said. "He usually reeks of garlic and rancid oil, so I keep my distance. But what do his looks matter? I am sure he is all right."

"Stefan says that he sleeps all day in the garage and prowls about in the park half the night. If that is not suspicious I don't know what is."

"Dearest aunt," Esther broke in with some impatience, "if the man were a spy he wouldn't sleep all day: he would be listening at keyholes, or prowling about the château; wouldn't he now?"

"Well, perhaps," the old lady was willing to admit.

The argument was then allowed to drop.

After a minute or two the two girls came in. The Princess picked up her prayer-book and soon the three

ladies became absorbed in reading the prayers of the day. Esther thought this a good opportunity for slipping away. She picked up a cloak and went out into the open. This was an hour ago. Since then she had wandered down the avenue as far as the outside gate and back again. The storm seemed to be drawing nearer: flashes of lightning were more frequent and more vivid, and the rumblings of thunder more sonorous. The atmosphere was growing more and more heavy, and now and again gusts of warm wind whipped up the dead leaves into a whirling eddy.

But Esther didn't care. She was not afraid of the storm, and the swish and swirl of the leaves was more agreeable to listen to than the dear old lady's jeremiads. The rain had not yet come down in earnest, but a few large drops the size of a shilling now began to fall intermittently. Esther thought it time to hurry back to the house. She also wanted to get hold of the chauffeur in order to give him her instructions for the coming journey, and as Stefan had rightly said, he was never to be found during the day, for he kept himself shut up in the garage, and only came out like a prowling cat at night.

It was getting very dark, too, and the big raindrops looked like coming down more frequently. Esther, who at the moment was walking down the avenue in the direction of the outside gates, turned back towards the house. As she did so she perceived through the gloom a vague form coming towards her.

Not in the least alarmed, Esther stopped dead and called out:

"Who goes there?"

The vague form came more clearly into view. It was the chauffeur.

Esther couldn't see him very well, only the outline of him in his rough clothes, with the short woollen coat, the loose wide trousers and high boots, all of which made him appear like a bulky Titan. His long hair was whipped up by the wind and twirled above his head,

adding yet a few more inches to his stature. He was about to pass by when Esther stopped him.

"I have been wanting all day to see you, comrade," she said peremptorily. "Why didn't you come when I sent for you?"

He went on a step or two, then came to a halt and answered her gruffly over his shoulder:

"I had some work to do on the car."

"You know that we go to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Is the car ready?"

"Yes."

"I want to get to Uskenpol by three o'clock in the afternoon. Can you do it?"

"Only if we start very early."

"I'll be ready at daybreak."

He made no comment on this, waited a few seconds, then turned and started to walk back towards the house.

"Wait!" Esther commanded.

"The rain will be down directly," the man retorted curtly. "Better go in."

"Never mind about the rain. Listen."

He halted, and she went on: "This is what we are going to do to-morrow. You will drive me first to the Municipal Building at Uskenpol. You will wait for me there. I shall be about half an hour. After that we will start back for Ufelgrad."

"I can't do the double journey in one day," he grunted. "It will be dark long before we can get back here."

"I know," she rejoined, "but we are not coming back here at all. Now listen."

"The rain will be down directly," he reiterated. "Better come in."

But Esther was obstinate. She wouldn't move. She had everything mapped out in her mind and she wanted to make it all clear to this queer, surly creature while she had him to herself away from the rest of the household. Kati or Stefan might be hanging about,

one never knew. The whole thing was too serious to risk anyone overhearing.

"Wait," Esther commanded. "Tell me, have you a good map of this district—one that shows all the cross-roads and even the small side tracks?"

"I have," he replied.

"Well, study it, then," she enjoined. "Spend half the night studying it if you must, until you have every detail of it clear in your mind. What I want you to do to-morrow after we leave Uskenpol is this: you will take the road to Ufelgrad and go on till you can pick up a cross-road which will lead you to a place called Varnakieff. Look for it on the map—Varnakieff," she reiterated.

Even as she spoke a vivid flash of lightning tore the clouds asunder, whilst a crash of thunder stifled the word in her throat. Then the heavens opened and down came the rain like a sheet of water. Nature was in one of her fiercest moods. Esther gave an involuntary little scream of distress. It was not the sudden fury of the storm that had frightened her, but a full-throated cry like that of a wild beast in a rage. She heard it, but where it came from she couldn't tell. There was another flash of lightning which for the space of one second floodlit the entire scene around. She called to the chauffeur, but he had disappeared. There was another cry, and then another, each one more terrifying than the last, and each in a different key, rising from rage to blood-lust and ending in agony.

After that there came no other sound save the swish of the rain and crash after crash of thunder.

Esther wrapped her cloak closer round her and fled precipitately to the house.

NOWELL

CHAPTER XXX

THE next morning the sun rose serene and glorious. Exquisite tones of rose and chrysoprase and lemon-gold spread over the sky and tinged the distant heights with a full brush of all the loveliest colours to be found on an artist's palette. Esther hadn't slept much. As soon as the storm abated she and the three ladies had gone to bed, and when the wind and rain were finally lulled to silence she threw open her window, and with her head on the pillow she gazed out into the night. After a time the stars peeped twinkling out, and the mysterious waning moon emerged pale and vaporous from behind the clouds. She watched until her eyelids ached, and presently she fell asleep. At the first streak of dawn she woke, for her window faced south-east and the soft rosy light came creeping into the room.

Half an hour later she was ready dressed. She was busy cramming a few necessities into a small valise—things which she would require for the one night to be spent probably either in the open or in a labourer's cottage, when Kati came in, bringing tea and home-made black bread.

Esther had taken an affectionate farewell of her aunt and cousins the night before, but when she had eaten her meagre breakfast and prepared to go downstairs she found the three ladies waiting for her on the landing. There were many hugs and kisses and embraces, and many tears shed at this final leave-taking. Esther's heart was full of sorrow for these three dear and plucky women and of foreboding for their future, but she assured them that when everything was all right and Johnnie was safely out of prison they would both come and spend another happy week at Ufelgrad, and this prospect cheered them all up a little.

The chauffeur, looking as sinister as ever, was standing by the door of the old Citroën. Esther got in, while the ladies took it in turns to give her a last—really the last—loving hug. Finally the door was slammed to, the chauffeur struggled into his seat and off they started. All down the driveway the car bumped along over stones and clumps of weeds, then through the gates, where Stefan and Kati were standing to bid the English lady a respectful farewell. Esther ordered the chauffeur to halt. The last thing the faithful couple did was to offer a small packet of provisions for the journey. "The gracious Princess ordered it," Stefan said. "It is the best we could do. The bread is home-baked, and the eggs are fresh."

Esther thanked them with a soft glance of her tear-filled eyes. She put her arms round the old woman's neck and kissed her wan cheeks, and she grasped Stefan warmly by the hand. What these poor people must have risked and sacrificed in order to bring her this little parcel of comfort made her heart ache with pity.

A fresh start was made, the gates and the high encircling wall were left behind, and there came the open country with its jolting roads and devastating mud. It had been bad a week ago: it was almost terrifying now after the rain, with great rivers of yellow water cascading down the slopes and swirling in the gullies. But Esther was resigned to everything. Actually she hardly noticed the joltings and the bumpings. Every turn of the wheel which seemed to shake the very soul out of her body brought her nearer to Johnnie, so what mattered cramped limbs, frayed nerves and every sort and kind of discomfort? It was all coming right in the end.

At the first halt, when the chauffeur got down in order to clear the wheels of mud, Esther let down the window and called to him.

"You haven't forgotten the programme for to-day, have you?" she demanded.

Done me Roll no. 27

"No," was the laconic answer.

"Uskenpol first: then Varnakieff by a roundabout way."

No answer at all this time.

"You have studied the map?"

Still no answer.

"And have you found a road which you can take on the way to Ufelgrad which will take us to Varnakieff?"

As the man remained obstinately silent, and having cleared away the mud from the wheels, prepared to go back to his seat, Esther asked peremptorily:

"Why don't you answer when you are spoken to?"

"What do you want to know?" the man countered.
"If I know my way? Of course I do."

"So long as you understand—"

"I understand," he broke in gruffly, "that you want to go to Varnakieff without the police knowing anything about it. But take care, comrade, you are playing a dangerous game. That's all."

"Are you afraid?" she queried coldly.

The answer to that was a grunt and a shrug. And off they started again.

After a time Esther, who had been mooning and dreaming for the past hour or so, became aware, after a time, that the country through which they were driving was not the same as that which she remembered having gone through a week ago. Where was the open pasture land? The fields of clover? The spinneys which dotted the plain? Every moment the scene appeared more and more different. The ground was rising and the mountains were certainly much nearer. Though streams of turbid water came cascading down the road, the gullies were not thick with that gluey yellow mud of which she had such unpleasant recollections. The old Citroën was more often than not grinding up an incline or running down one, and Esther wondered more than once when this grinding went on whether

it would come to a standstill altogether and refuse to go on. But nothing of the sort happened. The chauffeur sat stolidly in his seat and his back appeared imperturbable.

Another thing which Esther could not fail to notice was that the villages past which they drove were obviously not those which she had driven through last week. Presently a wayside *isba* came in sight. The chauffeur drew up and in his usual stolid, taciturn way collected his empty petrol cans and carried them round to the back of the house. The same sort of people, peasants and labourers, sat outside the place, drinking and chatting and watching the approach of the car; others came running over from their cottages to join them, and soon they all congregated round the old Citroën, peering unashamedly into the interior at Esther and glueing their noses against the windows. They were a cheerful little lot, as the others had been, smiled at Esther when they caught her eye. She put her head out of the window and wished them all good-day and said something about the weather and last night's storm. They were obviously delighted and also astonished to hear her speaking their own language. To look at them they might have been the selfsame people as those others of a week ago, but the *isba* was certainly not the same. While they all remained standing round the car jabbering among themselves, smiling and nodding at Esther, pointing their finger at her and laughing at some jokes of their own, she thought it wisest not to speak to the chauffeur. As soon, however, as they were clear of the *isba* and the village she let down the window and put her head out, calling to the man to stop, which he did at once.

"We are not on the right road," she said.

"Yes, we are," he countered bluntly.

"It isn't the way we came last week," she insisted.

"It is the right way, anyhow."

"To Uskenpol?"

"No, to Varnakieff."

Esther frowned.

"Then you didn't understand my instructions," she said. "I told you to drive me to Uskenpol first and then—"

"If I had done that you would never have got to Varnakieff at all."

"What do you mean?"

"That the police in this country are not the fools they are in yours."

"I don't understand."

"Do you think they would believe your story that you were going back to Ufelgrad?"

"Why shouldn't they?"

The man shrugged and retorted harshly:

"Hadn't we better get along? As it is we shall have to spend the night in the mountains."

"I refuse to 'get along,'" Esther said peremptorily. "How dare you go against my orders?"

He made no reply to this. All he did was to make a fresh start, and did it with such a jerk that Esther was thrown violently back on her seat. Nor could she get another word out of him, although she called repeatedly commanding him to stop, which he certainly didn't do again. He drove on stolidly, unperturbed by her calls or her persistent banging against the window. Once she actually managed to open the door of the car and to jump out. But she missed her footing and fell down on the stony road, bruising her knees. He did pull the car up then, got down from his seat and helped her to get up. She was on the point of bursting into tears. He said:

"If we go to Uskenpol we shall both be under arrest within twenty-four hours. At Varnakieff we shall be safe for two or three days."

Funnily enough it was the words 'we' and 'both' that caused her to accept the inevitable. Evidently the man was afraid, in spite of his assurances to the contrary, and was working for his own safety as well as for hers. This was a reassuring thought, and she got back into

the car feeling less nervy and anxious. After all, her main object in life was to go to Varnakieff and find out about Johnnie.

In the end, before another fresh start was made, she registered a final protest.

"But my passport . . .?" she insisted.

"You won't want it at Varnakieff," he answered. And Esther had, perforce, to be satisfied. Was there ever such an extraordinary situation? Here she was in this wild, out-of-the-way country, entirely at the mercy of a sinister-looking creature who was simply working his will with her. He declared that he was taking her straight to Varnakieff, but was he? And if he wasn't, what could she do, anyway? Funnily enough, in spite of her helpless position, she was not in the least afraid. From the first she had trusted the man. Why, she couldn't tell. He was shaggy and bearded and rough, hideously ugly with that gash across his brow. She had never looked him straight in the face because he was so hideous; only once had she looked into his one eye. It seemed honest and kind and vaguely, very vaguely, reminded her of other eyes over in England that were also honest and kind.

Nature was getting more and more wild as the car plunged farther into the forest land. Far away the main range of the Urals towered in their majestic glory. At times the road would dip down into a narrow canyon and wind its way along the edge of a precipice, at the bottom of which a turbulent stream growled angrily. Then presently the valley would widen and the road meander gently on the margin of the stream, past a few lonely dwellings, with here and there patches of pasture land on which sheep and cattle seemed as if they had been dropped down from Heaven on this isolated spot, and gazed out of their patient, gentle eyes as if they were astonished to find themselves here.

Slowly the shades of evening began to creep around, plunging first the narrow canyon, then the road, then

the foothills, into a kind of luminous gloom: darkness that seemed to hold the light still captive, while the glow of sunset lingered on the snow-capped heights far away. The air had grown a great deal colder.

The chauffeur drove on while the last vestige of daylight still hung in the valley. When all was darkness he turned on his headlights, and went on for a time till he came to a clearing where pines and larches and silver birch formed a sheltering grove below the tree-clad mountains above. Here he came to a halt, got down from his seat and opened the door of the car.

"We will spend the night here," he said in his usual curt way. "It is cold, but there is a rug and I will make a fire."

Mechanically Esther stepped out of the car, thankful for a respite from the perpetual jolting and banging, which made her ache in every limb. The chauffeur did not pay any attention to her. He busied himself first with finding the best possible spot for a night's rest. Then he collected the cushions and a rug out of the car, and got everything ready as he had done that other time a week ago. Esther sank down on the cushions. The very fact of not being on the move was comforting. She took off her hat and passed her fingers through her hair. How thankful she was that fashion had decided in favour of a close shingle! Her head ached furiously, and suddenly she realised that she was ravenously hungry. She had had nothing to eat since dawn. Now she remembered the parcel which kind Kati and Stefan had got ready for her. All day with that constant jolting she had been disinclined to eat. She felt that if she swallowed a morsel she would certainly be sick. But now it was so different. The peace and silence of the forest were heavenly, and the mountain air, though decidedly cold, was the most delicious she had ever inhaled. It smelted of pinewood and of snow, of wet moss and decaying leaves. It would put life into a corpse, so Esther thought.

She struggled back to her feet and went over to the

car to fetch the parcel of provisions. The headlights were still on, but the chauffeur was not there. Presently she heard him in the distance collecting wood for a fire. He had evidently provided himself with an axe, and the crackling of broken branches was the most welcome sound she had heard for many an hour. How lovely a fire would be here in this enchanting spot! How romantic to see the smoke curl up and lose itself in the surrounding darkness: to smell the scent of burning pine and watch the flames play fitfully on the bare branches of birch and larch, the walls and dome of this grove of enchantment! Esther even thought that the companionship of that weird-looking one-eyed creature would be a valuable stimulus to this feeling of romance: he seemed to belong to the race of gnomes and kobolds that are known to haunt the forests and have their dwellings in the hollow primeval trees.

Presently the chauffeur came back with a large bundle of wood, tied together with a bit of cord and slung on his back. He set to work at once to lay and light the fire. Esther watched him, fascinated, thinking how resourceful the man was. He seemed to have thought of everything, to have foreseen everything. He even produced a lighter out of his pocket, and he was so serious, so methodical about it all. At the first crackling of the twigs he looked up at Esther, and seeing that she watched him intently he remarked: "There was no rain up here last night: the wood is quite dry."

Esther was sure that when he said this he smiled with his one eye; his mouth she could not see under his shaggy beard. She opened the parcel of provisions. There were half a dozen eggs, hard boiled, and some thick slices of brown bread, not black this time. Dear Kati! how thoughtful she had been, and what it must have cost Stefan to go round the cottages in Ufelgrad in search of oatmeal rather than rye! Esther set two eggs and two slices of bread aside for herself, and passed the rest across to the chauffeur.

" You must be hungry, too," she said lightly. " I am ravenous."

It was the queerest meal she had ever had in all her life, squatting on the low cushions, with the welcome glow of the fire warming her cramped limbs, and all around her darkness and that feeling of a wonderful immensity which only comes to a sensitive soul in places that are, as it were, lost to the rest of the world—parts of Russia for one, the Canadian Rockies or the *puszta*s in Hungary. Here the human soul ceases to think of itself as the lord of creation: it feels its littleness, its insignificance in the mysterious scheme of this stupendous universe. Esther, digging her teeth in the hard bread, felt very small and helpless and of no consequence at all in the great world: one of a colony of ants fussing to get in and out of their heap: and Russia appeared to her like a Titan who, with immense feet, scattered that heap so patiently built up, and sent all the fussing ants scampering in all directions.

Thus mooning and dreaming Esther finished her meagre supper. The chauffeur had been sitting opposite to her all this time, taciturn as usual. The darkness enwrapped him completely, so that all she could see of him were his knees doubled up under him and his big boots on which the firelight threw its fitful glow. Now and again, however, he leaned forward to feed or stir the fire, and once when he did that he raised his head and Esther caught sight of his face, of that one sinister-looking eye and of the other, quite soft and

kind, which brought back memories . . . memories which she had longed to relegate into those remote corners of her mind where things were stowed away that she wished to forget.

She drew a sigh, yawned and closed her eyes, stretched herself out on the hard cushions and presently, so she supposed, she fell asleep. She had a very funny dream. She dreamt that the queer chauffeur became completely lost in the darkness, disappeared, in fact, and that the dancing firelight lit up another face than his: a face that was not nearly so shaggily bearded, only bristly with a week's growth of stubble, and with nothing like the same mop of long, unruly hair; nor was it disfigured by that hideous scar across one eye. It was no longer sinister, in fact, for there was the mouth with its cheery smile; nor was it strange, for the two eyes shining clearly at her were the dearest, kindest eyes that had ever gazed into hers since she was a child.

And in her dream she opened her eyes. She was dreaming and yet she was awake. An invisible force was holding down her limbs so that she could not move; it paralysed her tongue so that she could not speak, not for a long, long time, while she continued to gaze into those kind eyes, and they in their turn looked straight into hers. Dear, kind eyes, the dearest she had ever known in life. And suddenly her tongue was loosened and she murmured: "Nowell!"

"Awake, darling?"

Oh, yes! it was Nowell's voice all right. Cheery, rather dry, it came from behind that stubbly moustache, while the fire crackled and the fitful flames played upon a face which she certainly had never thought of seeing here. As her tongue had been loosened, so now her limbs felt free. She pulled herself up with a jerk. No! she was not dreaming. This strangest of all strange things in the world had really come to pass. It was Nowell, really Nowell who was sitting by the campfire opposite to her. If she had put out her hand, avoiding the fire, she could have touched him. And

what's more she was not dreaming, nor had she died and gone to Heaven. The darkness was still there, and the giant trees and the great mysterious immensity.

She said stupidly: "What time is it?" And then laughed because it was such a silly question to ask, and because she felt idiotic and very, very happy. He laughed, too, in the lighthearted way he always had, and answered:

"Close on midnight. Haven't you got a watch?"

"Yes! I have, but it is too dark to see."

"The moon will be up directly."

"Will it? How heavenly!"

It was all so silly, because she didn't care a bit about the moon, nor about what time it was. She was bubbling over with questions she wanted to ask and didn't know where to begin. He forestalled her, however.

"You didn't know me before," said he, "did you?"

"No, of course not. How could I?"

"You never bothered to look at me."

"Why should I? You were just the chauffeur, and a jolly disagreeable and surly one at that. Why in the world did you play that trick on me?"

"You might have given me away at Ufelgrad . . . not meaning to, of course."

"But why——?" she began, and he broke in:

"Now you are going to ask a silly question: why did I come?"

"Yes! Why?"

"My dear, I came because I was not going to let you career about this God-forsaken country by yourself, that's all."

"But how did you know where I was?"

He laughed, and quoted with a smile:

"Elementary, my dear Watson."

"In fact," she countered with mock earnestness, "you have been spying on me."

"Not to put too fine a point upon it," he answered, "I have."

"Since when?"

"Since we met on the doorstep of Belgrave House; was it twelve days ago?"

On the doorstep of Belgrave House? Was it really only twelve days ago that she had stood beside Nowell in a recess of that crowded hall, feeling sick at heart, lonely and forlorn because she had longed to rest in his arms, and to feel his kiss upon her lips, to forget the world and all its stupid conventions for one brief moment of happiness? And all the while he remained cool and calm, master of himself and a slave to propriety. She had said good-bye to him then, certain that he did not love her as she desired to be loved, that he would always be the perfect gentleman rather than the perfect man, and that though he had sworn that whenever she wanted him he would always be there, when she did want him he was always far away.

Only twelve days! It seemed like eternity.

She said abruptly: "Nowell, Johnnie has been arrested." And as he made no remark to this, she went on: "Did you know that my coming to Russia had to do with him?"

"I didn't at first," he replied, "but afterwards I guessed."

"How?"

"You told me that you were getting a *visa* on your passport as you and Miguel had planned a motor tour on the Continent for your honeymoon. You did, didn't you?"

"Yes!"

"When I found out that that was a lie——"

"Nowell!" she broke in, protesting.

"When I found out that it was a lie," he reiterated coolly, "I naturally guessed that you were giving Miguel the slip. He was abroad and you were going off to Russia on some business of your own which you did not want him to know anything about. I, on the other hand, made up my mind to find out what that business was."

"Then what did you do?"

"I began by interviewing the same amiable gentleman upstairs who got you your *visa* and permits. You must, by the way, have paid him pretty heavily for getting these for you all in a moment."

"And I suppose," she retorted drily, "that you paid the same amiable gentleman equally heavily for giving me away."

"Well! I think that our mutual friend spent a very profitable hour or so that morning."

At which she laughed. She didn't know why, nor did she know why in the midst of her terrible anxiety about Johnnie she felt suddenly so happy—so happy that she had to laugh immoderately, almost hysterically. But there were so many questions she wanted to ask him, so many things that she did not understand, that she quickly grew serious again.

"Do you know," she queried gravely, "that spying upon me like that was a disgusting thing to do?"

"I suppose it was."

"Yet you did it?"

"What else could I do? You didn't confide in me, did you?"

"No."

"Why didn't you?"

Whereupon she fell to wondering why she didn't confide in the one being on earth who would have understood, and who would have been a help and never a hindrance. She sighed and said:

"Because I was a fool, I suppose."

As this called forth no remark from him she went on after a moment or two:

"Were you on the same train to Moscow as I was?"

"No. I chartered a plane and flew to the Russian frontier. I had to get ahead of you, you see."

"You knew I was going to Samara?"

"I did, thanks to our mutual friend."

"But how did you know I was going to Uskenpol?"

"By that time, my dear, it was not difficult to guess that you were going to your relatives at Ufelgrad."

"And when did you find out about Johnnie?"

"About his being under arrest?"

"Yes."

"At Ufelgrad, of course."

"But how?"

"By keeping my ears open. I was not always asleep in the garage, you know, as your faithful Stefan made you believe."

"More spying on the part of Sir Nowell Ffoulkes?" she mocked.

"Oh! it was an easy job. You ladies talked things over pretty freely, didn't you? And I quite enjoyed listening at open windows and doors that were left carelessly ajar. I think when I have seen you safely through all this trouble, I will take up spying as a profession. I believe I should be quite good at it."

"How could you stand that awful beard, Nowell? And that disgusting mop of hair?"

"And not washing for days at a stretch? That was pretty bad, I admit. The beard and the wig I bought at Nathan's, and their make-up man taught me how to do that scar over one eye. I told them that I was playing in an amateur performance of *Robert Macaire*."

"Nowell!" Esther ejaculated with real earnestness, "you are wonderful!" She drew a deep sigh then added: "And you did it all for me!"

"No more than what you are doing for Johnnie. How could I let you continue in that wild search after him without as much as an inkling how to set about it? It was a forlorn hope from the first."

"Why forlorn?"

"My dear, you know nothing about Russia. Your coming out here all alone was nothing short of madness."

"I hoped that the Rabrinskis could have helped me. I didn't know that the Prince was dead, or that my poor aunt and my cousins . . ."

She broke off for a moment or two and then resumed: "Nowell! It is too awful!"

And as he remained silent, mechanically feeding the fire, she began telling him of the sorrows and the misery those three noble women were enduring with such undaunted heroism and such pathetic belief in a brighter future. She talked on and on because she was happy in the companionship of the one being in the world who always understood her and who was always ready to give heartfelt sympathy to anyone in trouble; and it was so wonderful to be here alone with him in this all-enveloping darkness and in this vast solitude. She talked of the Rabrinskis and of all the pinpricks they were forced to put up with, lest greater evil befell them; and then of all those vexatious regulations, of all the red tape and those endless permits, the lack of which meant serious danger to personal liberty and even to life.

"Nowell!" she ejaculated, remembering all that, "have you got the right papers and permits? One doesn't seem able to move about in this benighted country without a packet of them."

He answered her with a light laugh:

"I didn't get any papers or permits. As soon as I left Moscow I was on my own: just an unwashed Bolshie chauffeur with a few roubles in his pocket. I gave myself a jolly good time, I can tell you. You don't know what fun I had over this old taxi. I bought it in Moscow from another Bolshie fellow who was down-and-out, and I plied for hire with it till I got to Uskenpol, where I got you for my fare."

"But, Nowell," she cried, "if you had no papers they might have arrested you!"

"They might, but they didn't."

"They might yet do it . . . at Varnakieff."

"They might," he laughed, "but they won't. Don't I look like a typical Bolshie? They'd never mistake me for anything else."

"I didn't know you spoke Russian so well, either."

"I don't. I learned a bit when I joined up. They were giving extra pay for it, you remember, at the

beginning of the War. Then when Miguel Alvalho gave me that job in British Guiana I chummed up with a Russian friend of his out there and practised a lot with him. And I was out here for months lately. My uncle's property which came to me when he died happens to be in this district. That is how I know my way about round here."

Then all at once she harked back to the one subject that was always uppermost in her mind . . . Johnnie!

"Nowell," she implored, "what are we going to do about Johnnie?"

"I'll tell you that when we are in Varnakieff and have spoken to the people who were the last to see him."

"You know why he came out to Russia, don't you?"

"I do and I don't," he replied. "I only heard snatches of conversation, you know, between you and the Princess. But I did gather that his coming out had something to do with the ex-Tsar who is supposed to be in Varnakieff, and that was why you wished to go there. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Esther replied. "Johnnie was sent out by the *New Era* to try and find out what truth there was in the rumour that the ex-Tsar was still alive and gathering an army round him to overthrow the Bolsheviks and get back his throne."

"I shouldn't have thought," Ffoulkes muttered, "that Ralstane would have been such a fool."

"It was criminal, wasn't it?" Esther said with a catch in her throat. "Johnnie was too young to be sent out on such a difficult mission; he was so inexperienced. You should have seen him when he went out, all full of hope and enthusiasm. It was wicked. Wicked!"

She was on the verge of breaking down, for she had suddenly realised how tired she was. So very, very tired. It was late in the night now and cold. The moon proved herself to be a cheat, made no attempt

to lighten the darkness and kept herself hidden behind heavy banks of cloud.

"It looks as if last night's storm was coming this way," Nowell remarked. "Let me put the cushions back in the car; I can make you quite comfortable, and you would get a better night's rest."

"No!" Esther pleaded. "Let's wait. It is so much nicer here."

He went off to get more wood for the fire, and she fell back with a weary sigh on the hard cushions. When he came back she was fast asleep. He tucked the rug more closely round her, fed the fire and squatted beside it, watching.

NOWELL

CHAPTER XXXII

THE heavens were at war the next morning. Nowell roused Esther at five o'clock, just in time to get her and the cushions back into the car before the rain came down. Half the night the clouds, surcharged with electricity, had rolled and barked, thundered and crackled, and been torn asunder by flashes of fork lightning. The mountains tossed back and forth echo upon echo of this aerial warfare, but the rain held back until the dawn broke. It came down with a rush then and with it came a cascading of turbid streams down the stony mountain road.

The travellers settled down inside the car, muffled up in their mantles and the one and only rug until the fury of the elements showed signs of abating.

"It will be easier going presently," Ffoulkes remarked, when at Esther's wish, not to say command, he sat

down beside her and wrapped the rug round her knees. She contrived to get a couple of hours' sleep huddled up in the corner of the car. The first sound that greeted her ears when she woke was Nowell's cheery voice saying:

"And what about a bit of breakfast?"

Breakfast? There was nothing for breakfast. The scanty provisions provided by Stefan and Kati had been consumed the night before.

"There is no breakfast," she said dolefully.

"Oh! isn't there?" he retorted. "You wait and see."

And from an inner pocket of the car he produced first a paper parcel which contained some thick slices of maize bread and a pot of lovely thick curd.

"Nowell!" she ejaculated, "how did you manage to get all that?"

"At the last halt we made before we settled down for the night. You remember how nice and jolly the people were. And mine host of the *isba* was most amiable. The Russian *moujik*, you know, is a very hospitable creature. He will always bring out his best for distressed travellers."

"But this is perfectly delicious food," Esther declared; and dug her teeth into the maize bread. "And just look at this curd. People in London would pay no end of money for a pot like this."

Nowell produced a knife for cutting the bread and a spoon for the curd.

"Nowell," Esther demanded, "where did you learn to be so thoughtful?"

They sat side by side in the car and shared the succulent meal. Esther was young and she was hungry, and for the time being was able to forget both trouble and anxiety. After she had eaten she nestled back into her corner and had another sleep. When she woke Nowell was no longer there. The rain had turned itself into a kind of Scotch mist which blurred the outline of distant heights and spread a humid mantle over the

forest trees. The car felt hot and stuffy. She opened the door and stepped out. In spite of the damp the air she inhaled was a sheer delight. As there was no sign of Nowell she shouted to him. His voice came back from the distance in response:

"Back soon!" he called.

She spent some time walking up and down the road, with her cloak held closely round her. She didn't feel cold, though the temperature was low; in fact, she said to herself that she had never felt better in all her life, but she missed Nowell and wished he would come back quickly. Half an hour later he emerged out of the nearest grove of trees. At once she saw that he had spent his time in re-making up his face with the false beard and hair and the streak of scarlet grease-paint across his eye. In fact, when he came out of the thicket into the open Esther thought that he looked again like one of those kobolds who dwell in the hollow of forest trees and about whom she had read and shivered over when she was a child. Thus disfigured, his nearness lost some of the charm which had caused her to feel so wonderfully happy during the early hours of this unforgettable night. Somehow, the disguise whereby his personality appeared entirely submerged in that of the uncouth Russian *moujik* brought the reality of her situation forcibly home to her. It was all very well to sit by the camp fire in the wilds of the Urals, to moon and to dream, but there was Johnnie to think of and the awful danger which threatened him, and in a sense that danger appeared more imminent when this rough Bolshevik peasant approached her, even though she knew that his appearance was only make-believe. At his request, and silently, she got back into the car, and felt quite thankful when he resumed his place on the driving-seat and she no longer could see that ugly scarred face and disfigured eye, only the broad, uncompromising back.

NOWELL

CHAPTER XXXIII

A START was not made until past eleven o'clock. The rain had held over for some time by then and the road become comparatively easy to negotiate. The scenery was magnificent. At any other time with less anxiety on her mind Esther would have been ready to fall under its spell. It was Russia at her grandest and most picturesque, with the snow-capped heights as a background to dark, impenetrable forest-land, silvery birch and graceful larches and tall majestic pines that sheltered the grizzly and the wolf.

"How far are we from Varnakieff?" Esther had asked when the start was made.

"Forty odd miles. We should be there in about three hours even with this old bus."

"You have enough petrol for that, have you, Nowell?

"Yes, quite all right."

They passed several villages, some of them perched on the mountain side, and Esther wondered whether this was the same road that Johnnie had traversed when he made his way to Varnakieff. She tried to see the landscape, as it were, through his eyes: tried to picture him to herself driving along this road with hope unchecked and boyish enthusiasm egging him on. There came a time when Ffoulkes slowed down the car and, turning to her, said simply:

"That is Varnakieff over there."

They were on high ground and on ahead the road dipped sharply into a valley, where nestled a double row of one-storeyed, whitewashed houses with green shutters to the tiny windows and hemp-thatched roofs. Half-way up the street a typical Russian well stretched its tall wooden arm up towards the sky.

Nowell was pointing that way, and Esther, her heart oppressed with excitement, echoed the magic word "Varnakieff."

Nowell put the Citroën up in the backyard of a wayside *isba*, distant about two hundred yards from the village. Esther could not help remarking that here, contrary to other places where they had halted on the way, no one took any notice either of them or of the car. She said so to Nowell.

He quite agreed and added: "They are used to strangers here, I imagine."

Esther got out of the car and they made their way together to the front of the house.

"We'll see what they can do for us in the way of food," Nowell said. But Esther declared that she could not swallow a morsel.

"Do let's ask the landlord," she begged, "if the ex-Tsar is really staying—"

"For Heaven's sake," Ffoulkes broke in hurriedly, "never speak of him here as the ex-Tsar. If they are the people I take them for Nikolas II is still the Little Father Tsar for them—His Majesty the Tsar of all the Russians—and they will only put up with us if they think that we are of the same way of thinking."

"So long as we do get in touch with him," Esther said lightly, "I don't mind what I call him."

She broke off and then resumed: "You do think we shall, don't you?"

"Get to see him, you mean?"

"Yes."

"If His Majesty is in this village," he assured her solemnly, "I am sure that we shall."

"Aunt Pauline told me definitely that the ex—I mean the Tsar, is living in Varnakieff, in the house of a sort of village chieftain, Staroshka they call him, a man called Patchenko."

"Then all we've got to do," Nowell concluded with unabated cheerfulness, "is to go and call on Staroshka

Patchenko. But," he added sternly, "you must have some food first."

Thus admonished, Esther allowed Nowell to lead her into the *isba*. Here, in a low-raftered room, a few men were sitting about at trestle-tables, drinking the local *piva* and consuming maize porridge helped down by curd and rye bread. They all looked round when Esther and Nowell came in, had a good stare at them, and then returned to their porridge after a whispered comment on the appearance of the strangers. Esther's sharp ears caught the word: "*Angleeski*." It was spoken without the slightest note of hostility, but all the same she promptly made a remark to Nowell in her impeccable Russian. This brought about further comments and a more prolonged stare, the latter decidedly friendly. Altogether the atmosphere of the place was pleasant and reassuring. In appearance these men were rough and unwashed, not unlike Nowell Ffoulkes in his make-up as a Bolshie chauffeur, but they were extremely amiable. As there was no free table available at which the strangers could sit, three men rose from one and offered their places to them. Esther would have declined, but at a nudge from Nowell she accepted with a gracious smile and a few words of thanks.

Nowell in the meanwhile had held a brief conversation with the host. He now said to Esther: "Our host tells me that he has some wild raspberries which his daughter picked in the forest early this morning. He suggests your having some *puliszka* (maize porridge) first, with curd, and then the raspberries. What do you say?"

Esther smiled in response. "I am wondering," she said, "if we have come to heaven."

"Then you would like that?"

"Only if you will share this glorious food with me."

He gave the necessary orders, after which he said ceremoniously to Esther:

"If you will excuse me now, I'll go and get a clean-up. There's no necessity for me to look like a Bolshie here."

"But won't they think it funny," she objected, "if you suddenly look all different?"

Nowell laughed. "Not they. I imagine they are used to that sort of lightning transformation in Varnakieff."

He didn't go, however, till he had seen Esther safe under the charge of a bright-faced, fair-haired daughter of the host, and heard the two women jabbering away with one another as if they were lifelong friends.

"The house of the Staroshka?" Nowell had enquired of the host before they left the *isba*.

"But there, comrade," the latter replied, and pointed up the village street, where a white house with sloping grey-tiled roof could be seen standing slightly back from the road behind a low wall and an iron gate.

Esther was nearly sick with excitement. She had eaten nothing but the raspberries and a spoonful or two of curd, both of which were delicious. The thought of meeting the man whom all the world thought to be dead was exciting enough in itself, but the prospect of hearing news of Johnnie was what made her heart beat almost to suffocation. She and Nowell—the real Sir Nowell Ffoulkes at last, shaved, his hair smooth and tidy, and as handsome as ever in spite of his rough peasant clothes and clumsy boots—walked rapidly down the gentle incline to the village street. Not so much a village, be it noted, as a little township, for one or two of the cottages served as small shops, with miscellaneous goods displayed outside their front door. The house of Patchenko, the Staroshka, was midway down the street, and on the spur of a hill, high up on the left, there was a small church, whence came at the moment the tinkling sound of a bell. They had just passed the first two houses in the village when Esther suddenly came to a dead halt and gave a loud cry: "*Vera!*"

Vera Leonow was standing outside one of the village shops close by. She had a basket on her arm and was engaged in buying eggs from the buxom shopkeeper. At Esther's cry she turned, nearly dropped her basket of eggs, which the other woman fortunately rescued, and ran across the street with arms outstretched. Esther caught her in her arms. The girl was overcome with emotion. She slid down on her knees and, burying her face in the other's skirt, she burst into tears.

"Vera dear! My little Vera!"

Esther spoke softly to her, raised her from the ground and put her arms round her. "Vera dear," she went on, "what are you doing here?"

Still unable to speak, Vera dragged Esther with her across the street towards the shop. The woman there was still standing outside her front door, watching the dramatic little scene. She stood aside when she saw the two girls come along, and beckoned to them to go in. She then went over to where Ffoulkes had remained quietly awaiting the turn of events.

"That is Vera Leonow," she told him. "She is the privileged one who looks personally after His Majesty's comfort in the house of our Staroshka, Alexei Patchenko. Perhaps, comrade," she went on, "you will be pleased to come in."

Ffoulkes followed her into the cottage. Here he saw the two girls installed, sitting side by side, clasping one another by the hand and talking animatedly together.

Vera Leonow glanced up at Ffoulkes with earnest, timid eyes. She rose and dropped a curtsy, wiped her small palms on her apron before she ventured to take the hand which the noble gentleman held engagingly out to her.

"You know Gospodin Curryer, Vera?" he asked her. But all that Vera could do was to swallow her tears, wipe her eyes with a corner of her apron, and nod her head vigorously.

"Vera's father and mother were in Aunt Pauline's service before the War," Esther explained. "Leonow was her coachman and his wife helped in the kitchen. We knew them all when we stayed at Ufelgrad, Johnnie and I. Vera was only a little girl then, and we were very fond of her, weren't we, Vera?"

"What happened to them?" Nowell asked in English, presuming a tragedy.

"It was Vera's father who saved the Tsar's life. He lost his own in doing it. Her mother gave her life for the Tsar under the most tragic circumstances. She has been telling me all about it. It is all too sad. And now the girl is sacrificing her youth and her whole future for the same cause. Aren't they wonderful, Nowell?"

"Have you asked her about Johnnie?"

"Yes. He was here in July. Vera," she said, turning to the girl, "tell this noble gentleman what you told me about my brother Gospodin Curryer."

And Vera then related to Nowell what she knew about Johnnie.

"He was here," she said, "for the festival which we hold in Varnakieff every year on the anniversary of the day when it pleased God to save our Little Father Tsar from death. It was on the 16th of July that our Little Mother Tsaritsa and all the Imperial Family were murdered at Yekaterinburg, and lots of people come here on that day to pray for the repose of their souls, and give thanks to God for the life of the Little Father. They come from the villages around and tribesmen come from the steppes. Gospodin Curryer came along in the company of some village folk whom he had met at Uskenpol. He wanted to see His Majesty because he wished to write letters about him in English newspapers. He said that in England everyone was anxious for our Little Father Tsar to get back his throne, and that English people would give their money for a big war and for paying the army. Gospodin Curryer was happy to see me, and I was happy to

be of service to him. He wanted permission to take a photograph of our Little Father Tsar, and I was able to get this permission for him. He was here altogether three days. When he left us he said that he was going to Ufa first and from there straight down to Astrakhan, and that we were to expect him back in Varnakieff in about four weeks' time. He would have, he said, some splendid news for us by then; but we never saw him again from that day to this."

"We have had no news of him, either," Esther said, "and he never got to Astrakhan. We are in mortal terror that he has been arrested."

"If the photograph which he took of His Majesty was found on him," Vera rejoined with a sigh, "it will go hard with him."

"Vera dear," Esther interposed abruptly, "can I see the ex—can I see His Majesty?"

Vera demurred.

"The Little Father is not strong," she said. "He has been ill, and we must not tire him."

"I will not tire him," Esther protested earnestly. "And you must help me, Vera. You helped my brother before, you must help me now."

Vera looked anxious and distressed. She glanced up shyly first at Esther, then at Nowell, and finally took refuge in tears.

"Vera," Esther insisted, her earnestness turning to impatience, "don't stand there and cry like a ninny. If you can't help me, say so, and I will go to your Staroshka and ask him. Now, don't be stupid. Stop crying and show me and this noble gentleman the way."

The suggestion to go and see the Staroshka seemed to come as a great relief to the poor girl. "Yes, yes," she assented eagerly, "we will go and ask Alexei Patchenko. He will say what we must do."

She dried her tears and led the way out of the shop and up the street. Esther and Nowell followed.

Now that the hope of hearing definite news of Johnnie was becoming a certainty, Esther's nerves were in a state of high tension. Her knees were shaking, and at one time she was forced to cling to Nowell for support, for she felt herself falling, so intense was her excitement. The Staroshka's house as it loomed nearer and nearer appeared to her like the gate of some enchanted castle in which she would be faced either with life or with death.

NOWELL

CHAPTER XXXIV

At Vera's timid request Esther and Nowell waited outside while the girl went across the small forecourt to the front door. She lifted the latch and went in. Two or three minutes later she came back, held open the iron gate and said ceremoniously: "Will you be pleased to come in?"

Esther and Nowell followed her into the house. It was substantially built in the shape of an L, with a verandah adorned by a carved wood balustrade running down the length of the longer side; the shorter one faced the street sheltering behind a low wall and the small iron gate. The front door gave directly on a large, square room with whitewashed walls and raftered ceiling. It was obviously the living-room, scantily furnished with wooden benches all round, and in the centre an oak table on which were various appurtenances for writing, a carafe filled with water and a glass. Behind the table there was an armchair with tall back elaborately carved and against the wall facing the front door a large oak cabinet. On the right in a recess of the wall there was a sculptured figure of the Virgin

and Child, gaudily painted, and in front of it a tiny lamp in which a light was burning. Two or three pictures of devotional subjects hung on the walls and an oil-lamp hung by a metal chain from the ceiling. There were two small windows, one on each side of the front door. On the left there was a door which was closed, and one on the right which, as the visitors entered the room, was opened, revealing the imposing figure of an oldish man clad in peasant's clothes of rough flannel, and wearing a short coat of goatskin embroidered in many coloured wools. He had long, white hair that fell down to his shoulders and a shaggy white beard. He had dark eyes deep-set beneath bushy eyebrows and looked extremely venerable and very kind. He came forward with perfect dignity to greet the newcomers and asked what was their pleasure.

The appearance of this majestic figure made Esther feel timid. Alexei Patchenko, the Staroshka, was so different to what she had pictured him, and somehow the atmosphere of this place with its bare walls and the faint perfume that exuded from the tiny burning lamp in front of the shrine, partook of mystery and had in it an unaccountable air of unreality. Quite against her will her eyes were drawn to that door on the left which remained hermetically closed. As soon as they had entered the room Vera had tiptoed up to it and glued her ear against the keyhole. In answer to a glance from Alexei Patchenko, she nodded, and then quietly slid back into the room and sat down on one of the benches in the angle of a wall, seeming to shrink into herself. All this caused Esther's heart to beat more rapidly than ever. So the ex-Tsar, thought to have been murdered, was actually here, not more than a few yards away, the other side of one door and a cottage wall! She threw an appealing glance to Nowell as if begging him for an assurance that she was really alive.

In the meanwhile the Staroshka had asked Esther to

take a seat in the high-backed chair. This she gladly did, and he then drew a bench close to the table and invited Nowell to sit down there beside him. Once again he asked his visitors what was their pleasure, and Esther at last gathered up sufficient courage to embark upon her request:

"My name is Esther Curryer," she said, "and this is my friend Sir Nowell Ffoulkes, an English gentleman. I am in great distress about my brother John, who is very dear to me. Vera Nikolaiewna tells me that he came to Varnakieff last July and that you saw him and spoke with him."

Patchenko nodded: "Yes!" he said. "A young *Angleeski* whose name I understood to be John Curryer was here on the day of our solemn annual festival. He had the honour not only of being presented to His Majesty, but he also had gracious permission to take a photograph which we all hoped would prove beyond a doubt that our Little Father Tsar is, by the grace of God, alive and prepared to mount once more the throne of his fathers which the emissaries of Satan have filched from him."

"I know all that, Alexei Fedorovitch," Esther interposed. "What I do not know, and what has caused me mortal anxiety, is what became of my dear brother after he left you."

"Rumour has been rife that those devils have arrested him."

"Arrested him, yes! that is what I dread. But what have they done with him? Where is he?"

"Unfortunately we have not been able to find that out. His Majesty has taken the keenest interest in him. We have sent emissaries all over the district to try and get some definite news, but so far we have been unsuccessful. But His Majesty has many faithful subjects in this part of Russia, and we still have hope."

"But why was he arrested?" Esther asked impulsively. "He has done nothing. He only came

as a representative of a great English newspaper to—”

The Staroshka gravely shook his head.

“John Curryer,” he broke in, “came to Russia to find out what the children of Satan wished to keep concealed. They have arrested him because they want to know where His Majesty is and what he is doing in the way of gathering the loyalists around his sacred person.” The old man paused a moment and then added: “They hope that John Curryer will tell them what he knows.”

Esther smothered a cry of horror; her eyes, dilated with a sudden nameless fear, searched the Staroshka’s face.

“You don’t think . . . ?” she faltered.

“They are devils,” he replied simply, “but prayers are offered daily to God in the whole of this district for the safety of your brother John.”

As he said this he made the sign of the cross and his lips moved, murmuring a prayer. Esther, with all the desire and the will to be brave, was overwhelmed with the thought of this awful, this appalling horror. “Johnnie!” she wanted to cry out. “Johnnie, what are those devils doing to you? What hellish methods do they employ to make you tell them what they wish to know?” She stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth to smother the scream upon scream that rose in her throat. Vera at once ran to her and poured out a glass of water, which Esther swallowed eagerly.

Nowell Ffoulkes had not joined in while Esther spoke with the Staroshka. He watched her with anxious eyes, knowing well what had flashed through her mind when the old man had said simply: “They are devils!” He, too, knew that power over life and death in Russia was, for the time being, in the hands of hell-hounds and, unlike so many optimists over in England, he saw no end for many, many years to come to this rule of Satan and his kindred.

It was now late afternoon and very little light came into the room through the two small windows at the end. Vera set to work to light the lamp that hung from the ceiling. Esther rose; she was longing for a breath of air, hoping that it would help her to regain control over herself. The lamp was alight now. It threw a feeble golden glow in a circle immediately beneath it on the table and on the bench where the two men were sitting, leaving the rest of the room in dense shadow. After she had lighted the lamp Vera tiptoed once more to the closed door and glued her ear to the keyhole, after which she turned and, meeting Patchenko's glance, she put a finger to her lips. Patchenko nodded. The Little Father Tsar was sleeping.

Vera put her arm round Esther's shoulders and led her to the front door. She threw it open, and Esther, with a great intake of her breath, leaned against the jamb and took in deep draughts of the invigorating mountain air. It had begun to rain and the sky looked heavily laden with an unbroken mass of clouds. From far away over the distant heights there came from time to time feeble rumblings of thunder.

"There will be another storm," Vera said. She then went out of the room, while Nowell Ffoulkes and Patchenko remained talking together in subdued voices.

"Where do you think, Staroshka," Ffoulkes had asked, "that they are keeping John Curryer?"

"I should say at Uskenpol," the other replied. "The Government have established a Police Administration there with an administrator and an inspector. I know that John Curryer intended to go straight from here to Astrakhan and would have to get his travelling permit at Uskenpol. He must have fallen into those devils' clutches when he tried to get the permit. I am afraid that he carried the photograph of His Majesty about with him. It would be a fatal thing if he did."

"Tell me," Nowell now enquired abruptly: "Is His Majesty well enough to undertake a journey? In easy stages, of course."

"Yes! I think so. Not immediately, of course because—"

"It will have to be immediately, my friend," Nowell broke in firmly.

"Then I should say that His Majesty is not well enough. We have to think of his health; his lungs are not strong. . . ."

"We have to think of his safety," Nowell insisted.

"Which, thank God, is not threatened for the moment."

Nowell said nothing more then. Vera had just come in again carrying a tray which she set upon the table. It was laden with a few refreshments: a bottle of *piva* which is the local beer and quite delicious, a few slices of maize bread, golden in colour and of extreme lightness, and some fresh raspberries from the forest. She drew another bench up to the table and called to Esther begging her to come and eat. Both Esther and Nowell made a great effort not to offend these kind people by refusing what was offered them. They both tried to eat, but it was difficult. Nowell was sitting close to Esther and from time to time he ventured to touch her hands. They were very cold and trembled fitfully.

AFTER a time the two girls rose and went back to the door. Esther seemed happier there, breathing in the fresh, damp air which the south-westerly wind was blowing into her face. The room had certainly become stifling in spite of the open door. Patchenko, however, was obviously unaware of any discomfort. He had

scarcely eaten anything and had sat by in silence, obviously absorbed in thought; nor did he say anything until the two girls were out of hearing. Then he resumed:

"I was right, was I not?" he asked Ffoulkes, "when I thanked God that His Majesty's precious life is not threatened for the moment?"

"His Majesty's safety," Nowell replied with great earnestness, "yours, my friend, and the child Vera's, are very seriously threatened. I don't like to be a messenger of evil tidings, but the facts are these: one of the cleverest spies in Europe is either in Russia at the present moment or will be within the next forty-eight hours. He is a man of international reputation: he has worked for Germany, for Roumania, even for Japan, and the Soviet Government who has exhausted every means in its power to discover the whereabouts of your Tsar, took him quite recently into its service. His identity, even to his employers, has always remained a mystery. In the Russian Secret Service he will be known as URIOI. He has several underlings who do spade-work for him, in advance of his arrival. The night before last, under cover of the storm, one of those fellows found his way into the park at Ufelgrad and overheard Miss Curryer giving me instructions for her journey to Uskenpol and thence to Varnakieff. I was acting as her chauffeur, you see, and the name of the village was unfortunately distinctly mentioned. It was pitch dark but, thank God, I got the man and strangled him as I would a dangerous cur. But quite apart from that, when URIOI has arrived in Russia he won't be many days before he ferrets out the whereabouts of the Tsar. There is no one to touch him for secret work of that description. It was because I knew this danger to be imminent that I drove Miss Curryer straight here, because I want you to entrust His Majesty and Vera Leonow and yourself to me so that I may take you as quickly as possible to a place of safety."

He finished speaking and in the half gloom his serious, kindly eyes searched the Staroshka's face, trying to read what went on behind that noble brow and those deep-set introspective eyes.

"Will you tell me," Patchenko asked Ffoulkes presently, "how you happen to know of this man URIOI?"

"He spends a great deal of his time in England, where he is well known and highly thought of. There have been whispers, unkind sometimes, about the source of his wealth, but no one, I imagine, suspects him at this moment of being in the pay of Soviet Russia."

"How did you come to suspect him then, my friend?"

"Only by putting two and two together," Nowell replied smiling. "I found they invariably made four." Then as a frown of puzzlement appeared on Patchenko's brow, he went on explaining: "I only mean that it was quite simple. You know that I was lucky enough last year to be helpful to a number of unfortunates who had come under the ban of the Cheka and were threatened with arrest. . . .?"

"I know," the Staroshka broke in gravely, "that you accomplished miracles of heroism and that many of His Majesty's loyal subjects, all of whom are personally known to me, owe their lives to you."

"All I did, my kind friend, was to shepherd those brave people from a danger zone to one that was comparatively safe. It is they who accomplished marvels of heroism in their patient endurance and unshaken loyalty. That is when, through things that were told me by these poor, persecuted people, that I first came on the tracks of the master-spy. Since then I happened to be in Paris about three weeks ago when, if you remember, the Soviet Government made an effort to kidnap General Boutcheva and Prince Lovitzine. Lovitzine I knew well from War-time days, and he and the General both told me of their active anti-Red propaganda in France. I knew

that this would mean a catastrophe for them both, so I did a bit of spying on my own, and quickly ferreted out what was in the wind. I had a good deal of fun out of that adventure, for Lovitzine and Boutcheva got away in a taxi, which I was driving, under the very noses of the Soviet spies who were trying to hustle them into a car, the owner of which I knew well. We drove straight to Calais, Boutcheva, Lovitzine and I," Ffoulkes concluded lightly, "and they are both safe in England now, so long as they don't let themselves be waylaid again."

Once more there was silence. Outside it was still raining and the rumblings of thunder seemed to come nearer. Patchenko drew a deep sigh. He rose and went across the room to the recess where the small light flickered in front of the ikon. He made the sign of the cross and his lips moved, murmuring a prayer asking God to guide him in the great decision which he would now have to make. After that he came back and sat down in the high-backed chair. Leaning his arms on the table he folded his hands and gazed long and searchingly on his English friend. Presently he said gravely:

"Mr. Nowell, you are a very good man. God has given you a great measure of courage as well as of resource. If it was the question of the safety of any other man or woman in the world I would now say to you: 'Think no more about us unfortunate Russians. God knows you have done more than enough to help us in our misery.' . . . No," he went on firmly, "please do not contradict me. There is not a loyalist in this part of the country who will not tell you that Alexei Patchenko knows everything that goes on. I know about the Solemkins, the Movitcheks and others whom you shepherded to a place of safety at risk of your life. I know how narrowly you escaped death when you saved General Boutcheva and Prince Lovitzine from falling into the clutches of the Cheka. But now it is enough. Your life belongs to those who

care for you. You must in future think of that and of your own safety."

Nowell would have broken in more than once, but every time he attempted to speak the old man put up his hand to restrain him.

"That is," he said in his usual grave, earnest way, "what I would say to you if it was a question of the safety of any other man or woman in Russia. But this is the case of the most precious life in all the world. You tell me, and of course I believe you, that that life is in immediate danger, and you have asked me to place His Majesty and the child Vera into your safe keeping so that you may take them to a place of safety. That is right, is it not?"

Nowell smiled and shook his head.

"Not only His Majesty and Vera Leonow," he said, "but also yourself, my friend. You are no longer safe in Varnakieff."

It was Patchenko now who smiled and shook his head. "I am the father of this little community," he put in gently. "I would not think of deserting them. As we say in Russia: 'When the shepherd steals away the flock will surely perish.' I am the Staroshka," the old man concluded with impressive dignity. "Whatever danger may threaten, I remain with my people."

"What a wonderful old chap you are," Nowell thought to himself; and his glance expressed the admiration which he felt. Aloud he said:

"Is that your last word, Staroshka?"

"My last," Patchenko made reply. "You would be the first to despise me if it were not."

And before Nowell could say anything more he called to Vera.

"Come, Vera Nikolaiewna," he said; "the matter which the noble English gentleman and I are discussing concerns you."

The two girls had been standing all this while in the open doorway. There was a small projection outside, over the door, which sheltered them from the

rain, and both were far too excited to feel the cold. They had been talking together in whispers, recalling memories of happy olden days in Ufelgrad: of carefree times when they were children, running about the great park without a thought of what the morrow might bring. How far did that time seem now with Sorrow and Death stalking the land and constant fear gnawing at the heart for loved ones who were in danger!

At Patchenko's call Vera turned in and came across the room to him. Esther followed. Patchenko, in his serious, ceremonious way, bade them both sit down, and after a few seconds of solemn silence he spoke to Vera.

"Our English friend here," he said, "has come to warn me that immediate danger threatens our Little Father Tsar. You, Vera Nikolaiewna, know as well as I do how often he has risked his life to save helpless and innocent people from the cruelty of the Cheka. It is a way with Englishmen, it seems, to do what is right and noble and take no heed of the consequences, and that is what this noble gentleman has done over and over again in the past year——"

"Staroshka, please! . . ." Nowell protested; and meeting Esther's great dark eyes fixed upon him with mute, passionate questioning he gave a careless shrug and responded equally mutely with a smile. But Patchenko raised his hand, asking for silence.

"I will say no more now," he resumed, "for time is short. Our English friends will now return to the *isba* for the night, as alas! this house is too small and too poor to offer them hospitality. We, in the meanwhile, will put the whole matter before his Majesty, and we will entreat him to accept our counsel and to entrust his sacred person to the safe keeping of Gospodin Ffoulkes. And whatever Gospodin Ffoulkes advises that advice we will follow."

The old man fixed his dark deep-set eyes on Nowell, waiting for him to speak. Esther's gaze was also turned to Nowell. Her eyes seemed to grow darker

and larger while she looked on him, and there gradually came into them a kind of luminosity that betrayed the intensity of her emotion as well as the understanding which gradually penetrated into her brain. It was the understanding of the man whom she had loved all her life without knowing anything about his character or about his inner motives: his secrecy, his absence when she needed him most. He had heard, as his forebears had done a hundred and fifty years ago, the call of the innocent and the oppressed, and he had devoted his life to them, not counting the cost or the risk. She would have spoken to him now if she could, but it was the others who had first claim on his attention.

"What is your advice, my friend?" Patchenko asked.

"We must start very early in the morning," Nowell said; "at break of dawn if possible. Will His Majesty be ready?"

"I am sure that he will."

"Is he strong enough to bear a long drive in an old car, on heavy roads?"

"He has marvellous courage," Vera murmured.

"You and Gospoja Curryer will sit inside the car with him. It is roomy, and we will make him as comfortable with pillows as we can."

"He has such courage," Vera reiterated fervently.

"And will you tell us whither you will take our Little Father Tsar?" the Staroshka asked.

Nowell gravely shook his head.

"No, my friend," he said. "You will be asked questions, and it is better that you should not know."

He paused a moment, rose and walked up and down the room once or twice, after which he came to a halt and stood facing the Staroshka.

"Do you trust me, Alexei Patchenko?" he asked with unwonted earnestness.

"I trust you, my friend," the old man replied solemnly, "with the most precious life on God's earth—our Little Father Tsar."

"Then to-morrow at the first streak of dawn," Nowell

concluded, "Gospoja Curryer and I will be outside your door, ready to make a start."

While these questions and answers came tumbling over one another in quick succession Esther's eyes wandered from one face to the other with a glance that became more and more strained while she listened. The Tsar, always the Tsar! His life, his safety! Yes, but not a word about Johnnie. What cared she about the Tsar? It was Johnnie she thought of—Johnnie whose life and safety were of far more importance than all the rulers of this earth. She tried to control herself, but at last anxiety bordering on indignation forced a cry to break out of her aching heart.

"Johnnie!" she exclaimed in a stifled voice: "Nowell, think of Johnnie. While you save others will you let him die?"

At this sudden cry Vera had at once put her arms round Esther's shoulders, trying to soothe her.

"No, no," she whispered gently, "we none of us will allow your dear brother to die. As soon as His Majesty the Tsar is in safety——"

"The Tsar!" Esther retorted hotly. "What is your Tsar to me?" She broke off for a moment and then went on spasmodically, every few words smothered by heart-rending sobs: "Nothing, I tell you. . . . Nothing! . . . My brother is everything. . . . He must come first. . . . Nowell, you understand? . . . Johnnie must come first. . . . To-morrow we go to find him. . . . Do you hear? . . . To-morrow. . . . I will not have him die! . . . I will not! . . . The Tsar's cause is forlorn. . . . I will not have Johnnie die for a lost cause. . . ."

Both Vera and Nowell did their best to calm the broken-hearted girl. Nowell had never seen Esther lose such complete control over herself. Fatigue, no doubt, and also the nameless horror which Patchenko's words had conjured up before her mind helped to break down that will-power of which she had always

been justly proud. Johnnie in the hands of those devils! Johnnie put to the question! Tortured to make him speak!

Nowell knew what mental torture she was enduring, but he could do nothing except hold her hand and whisper softly to her in English: "My darling, will you trust me? I swear to you that Johnnie shall be safe. . . . I swear it! . . . My dear, my dear, do try and trust me. You must know that I would never let Johnnie die."

He raised her hand to his lips, and after a time she gave him an answering gentle pressure. Gradually she grew more calm, dried her eyes and tried to master her sobs.

All through this Alexei Patchenko had remained silent. His kind old eyes were fixed with tender compassion on the weeping girl; at times they wandered anxiously to the closed door opposite. And suddenly he gave a gasp, raised his arm and, with shaking hand, pointed in that direction. In a moment Vera was on her feet. She tiptoed across and glued her ear to the keyhole, threw a reassuring glance at the old man and then, with infinite precaution, she opened the door and peeped into the next room. A few seconds of tense expectancy went by until Vera closed the door again and rejoined the others at the table.

"He is awake," she whispered to Patchenko; "but his dear face is beautifully serene."

Nowell and Esther did not wait for the rain to cease before they took their leave and went back to the *isba*, where they were going to spend the night. There was a lull for the moment in the turbulent atmosphere, but gusts of south-westerly wind heralded the breaking of the storm. Patchenko and Vera remained standing in the doorway as long as they could perceive the vague forms of their English friends moving away into the darkness. After which they turned in.

The rule of the house was that young Dmitri, the

nephew of Patchenko, spent the night on duty, outside the apartment occupied by the Tsar. Vera slept in the living-room and Dmitri patrolled every approach to the house: up and down below the verandah, across the courtyard which formed a square inside the L-shaped building, and round by the wall and iron gate which sheltered the house from the street. He slept during part of the day and guarded the precious life all night.

He now came out of the room. It was half-past eight. The other two were waiting for him. Vera brought him some supper. While he ate, Patchenko told him of the project which was on foot for the safety of the Little Father Tsar.

"An Englishman," the Staroshka explained, "who is called Nowell Ffoulkes and who is a friend of the young journalist John Curryer has brought us bad news. The police have at last realised that our Little Father is alive by the grace of God, and they have got wind that he is here in Varnakieff. You know what that means, Dmitri. At all risk we must see to it that His Majesty leaves here at once and goes to a place of safety. That brave Englishman Nowell Ffoulkes will escort him. He it is who has saved so many innocents from the fury of the Soviets, and it is he who has been chosen by God to have care of His anointed."

"When does His Majesty start?" Dmitri asked simply.

"At dawn to-morrow."

The boy said nothing more. He was accustomed to accept the Staroshka's decisions without comment. He was a self-contained, silent lad. He hardly ever spoke, and this was so noticeable that when Vera first came to Patchenko's house she thought that he was dumb. Many days went by before she as much as heard the sound of his voice. He was ready for duty now, outside in the storm and the rain! it was a duty which he had performed every night for months, going out before nine o'clock with lantern and a weighted

stick, an old army pistol and a heavy hunting-knife in his belt, and staying out until daylight.

At a sign from Patchenko Vera knocked at His Majesty's door. There was a feeble call in reply, and the girl then held the door open for Patchenko to enter. The latter threw a final admonishing glance to the young people and put a finger to his lips, after which he passed through into the Tsar's bedchamber.

The interview lasted less than a quarter of an hour. Patchenko came back with eyes glowing and face serene.

"He is wonderful," he said in response to a mute enquiry from the others. "His courage is sublime."

"Will he regret leaving Varnakieff?"

"It will only be for a little time," he said. "Soon he will be able to make every inhabitant in Varnakieff the happiest of mankind."

"But you, Staroshka?" Vera asked, a note of anxiety in her voice.

"His Majesty does not know that I am not to have the privilege of accompanying him," Patchenko replied simply. "Perhaps we can keep the knowledge from him for some time. I might be following in some other vehicle. We'll see when the time comes. Anyway, I didn't wish to worry him to-night with any details. He must get a good night's sleep: that is the principal thing."

"Did he ask after Gospoja Curryer and the English gentleman?"

"Yes. His Majesty heard voices and I told him who our visitors were. He regretted not to have seen Gospodin Nowell Ffoulkes, and spoke of him as a noble and heroic gentleman for whose welfare prayers must be said every night."

"He remembered his name in connection with General Boutcheva and Prince Lovitzine?"

"Yes. And he knew about the miraculous escape of the Solemkins and the Movitcheks and others. His

memory is prodigious, and so is his interest in all those who have remained loyal to his House and to him."

Vera drew a deep sigh of relief.

"Then all is well with our Little Father Tsar?" she murmured fervently.

"The great God has taken His anointed under His special care," was Patchenko's simple reply.

Having said this, the Staroshka called Vera and Dmitri to prayer. The three of them knelt down together in front of the ikon and Patchenko recited the liturgy of the day; after which there were prayers for the Little Father Tsar, and special ones for the noble English gentleman who would have that most precious of all lives under his special care on the morrow.

"Oh, God!" spoke Patchenko devoutly, "we humbly beseech Thee to give strength and power to the brave man who will have our Little Father in his keeping under Thy guidance. Give him the courage of the lion and the cunning of the fox that he may overcome Thine enemies who have dared to lay sacrilegious hands on Thine anointed. We also beseech Thee to save and protect our young English friend John Curryer. Mercifully look down on the sorrow of his loving sister, and deliver him from the fury of those who have forsaken Thee and Thy Holy Son. Amen."

They all rose and made the sign of the Cross on their forehead and their breast. Patchenko and Vera were now ready for bed. Vera prepared hers by laying mattress, pillow and blanket on the floor over across the door which gave on the room where slept Nikolas II, Tsar of all the Russias.

A solemn "God be with you this night" was said. Patchenko went to his room and Dmitri, wrapping a heavy cape of goat-skin round him, picked up his lantern and weighted stick, made sure that the pistol and the hunting-knife were safe in his belt, and went out on patrol duty.

Vera, before she finally lay down to rest, peeped into

His Majesty's room. Satisfied that the Little Father was sleeping peacefully, she extinguished the lamp.

A quarter of an hour later there was only one feeble light burning in the house of Alexei Fedorovitch Patchenko, the Staroshka. This was the one in front of the carved and painted image of the Virgin and the Holy Child.

NOWELL

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE worst of the storm broke soon after midnight. The village folk said afterwards that it was one of the worst they had ever experienced. The cottages seemed to rock under the lashes of the gale, and a number of trees on the mountain side were uprooted, dragging down others with them as they fell. Thunder was almost incessant, for the storm travelled in a circle round and above the mountains, the majestic heights tossing every echo back and forth as it crashed against their rocky walls.

Vera was worried and could not sleep. The noise kept her awake as well as anxiety about the Tsar. She had left his door ajar, and when she heard him coughing she went in once or twice with a candle to see if he was quite warm and comfortable, until on her third visit he begged her with gentle entreaty to leave him in peace.

"I assure you, my little Vera," he said, "that the storm does not worry me. Really, I love it. It is my friend. Close the door, little one, and leave me in darkness and in silence. I am very warm and quite happy."

By the flickering light of the candle she could see the serene smile on his lips and the happy look in his eyes. That smile and look had been absent from his face for some time now. He had been very ill during the summer, and the illness had left a torturing cough in its wake. Patchenko, who among his varied knowledge possessed something of the art of healing, had done everything that was possible for the illustrious patient. When he felt that he could not do enough, he wired to a learned doctor in Orenburg who had been one of the principal medical men in the Tsarist Army during the War, a staunch loyalist known to him, who led a precarious life in constant fear of persecution and arrest in a suburb of the provincial city. The doctor stayed for five weeks in the house of the Staroshka until the Little Father was decidedly convalescent. He only went back to Ordensburg at the earnest prayer of his wife, who was stricken with an incurable disease and felt herself dying.

His last instructions with regard to the Tsar were:

"There is nothing more that I can do, Alexei Fedorovitch," he said, "that you cannot do for him. He is decidedly better, and given care, which I know he will get in plenty, there is no reason why he should not make a good recovery. His lungs are, of course, affected, but not seriously, and our mountain air is the best healer for them. His heart is not strong, that you know, so you must avoid both fatigue and excitement during the autumn and winter months. If God wills, I will return in the spring, but any time that you think you want me you only need send me a wire and I will come over at once."

These instructions were, of course, obeyed to the letter, and for a time the Little Father Tsar delighted his host and his devoted little nurse with his good spirits and obvious hopefulness for the future. The visit of the young English journalist, bringing such wonderful news from the head of the greatest newspaper organisation in the world, had put prodigious heart

into him. More than once he expressed his firm conviction that with the vast sums promised to him by influential sympathisers in Great Britain, there was nothing that he could not accomplish at the head of his army, and that the next few months would see him, with God's help, safely installed on the throne of his forbears.

But all through this hopefulness and enthusiasm there always lurked the unappeasable sorrow after his beloved wife and his dear children. "To think," he would murmur at times, "that my beloved will only witness my triumph from the heavens above, and that it will not be my little Alexei who will be the Father of you all when I am gone."

With the autumn gales and the heavy rains, Nikolas II appeared to be losing strength, and when he heard of the disappearance—which meant the probable arrest—of the young English journalist, he became very depressed, and it took all Vera's devotion and Patchenko's care and skill to keep up his spirits, by constantly referring to the sympathy which Great Britain was showing half over the world for his cause, and the material help which the denizens of that immense Empire were ready to place at his disposal for the conquest of his throne.

Obedient to the Little Father's express wish, Vera had closed the door of his room, leaving him, as he requested, in darkness and in silence, to sleep. The look on his face, so serene and happy, had greatly comforted her; it showed that the heart was beating evenly and quietly, undisturbed by any excitement in anticipation of the journey on the morrow. At one time, in spite of the incessant rumbling of thunder and its occasional detonating crashes, in spite of gusts of blustering wind and clatter of hail and rain, she became drowsy. She heard the old clock in Patchenko's room strike two and then three; but after that she must have fallen asleep, for suddenly she sat up in bed, wide awake, wondering what it was that had roused her. She

listened, but heard no sound other than that of the storm, as fierce as ever, and a moment or two later the old clock striking four. Four o'clock! She must have been asleep the best part of an hour. Instinct made her glue her ear to the keyhole close to her. Not a single disturbing sound came from there, only the storm. Always the storm. And somehow it now seemed to the anxious girl as if the gusts of wind came rushing more violently underneath the door, and that the multifarious sounds of the storm came more loudly to her ear than they had done hitherto.

"The wind has blown the window open!" she thought, and was up from her mattress in an instant. Up and in the next room, where, as soon as she opened the door, she was met by a gust which nearly threw her over, while the french window opposite flapped and banged backwards and forwards threatening every instant to smash the panes of glass. It was pitch dark, but she found her way across the room and succeeded, with much difficulty, in closing the window, after which she tiptoed over to the bed, feeling her way along with her hands. No sound had come from there. Surely His Majesty could not have slept through all this disturbance. Still feeling with her hands Vera came close to the bed. Not a sound. She touched the foot of the bed, the blanket, the sheet. Heavens above! The sheet, and the pillow! She felt with both hands all over them. The bed was in disorder, and the Little Father was not there.

With a heart-rending scream she tumbled out of the room, fell across her mattress, picked herself up and tumbled again on the floor, still screaming. Screaming: "Help, Staroshka, help! The Little Father has gone!"

Less than two minutes later Patchenko was beside her, a lighted candle in his hand. He helped her to struggle to her feet. Trembling in every limb, her teeth chattering, Vera could hardly speak. With extended arm and quivering hand she pointed to the open door.

"The Little Father," she reiterated stammering, "he has gone."

In a trice Patchenko was over the mattress and in the next room. The flickering light of the candle revealed the one terrible fact: the bed was vacant. The old man put the candle down, went across to the french window, opened it and stepped out on the verandah. It had a low wooden balustrade, on which ivy grew freely. Patchenko leaned over it and thrice clapped his hands. Dmitri came running along from the back of the house, bending his head to the gale and swinging his storm-lantern.

"His Majesty!" Patchenko called as soon as he caught sight of him. "He has gone."

In an instant Dmitri had vaulted over the balustrade.

"Gone?" he cried hoarsely. "How? Where?"

"Where? God knows, but he did it by climbing over here." By the light of Dmitri's lantern the torn ivy at this one spot could be clearly detected.

"Go up Taravinka, Dmitri, and I'll send Vera down Tcheverusk way. Get along quickly now while I arouse the village."

Vera, in the meanwhile, had regained some presence of mind. She had already provided herself with a lantern, had slipped into knee-high boots, and donned a thick petticoat and fur-lined cape. All this was quickly done for she always slept in her clothes prepared for emergencies. She and Dmitri were soon on the way, while the Staroshka roused the village from sleep. On the housetop there was a bell used for sounding the alarm in case of fire or a serious accident. Patchenko rang it now. Its strident clangour rose above the rumblings of thunder and the southing of the gale. Clang! clang! went the bell, and one by one lights appeared in the tiny windows of the cottages. Clang! clang! again, and formless shadow-like figures appeared in every doorway. Men in goat- or sheep-skin mantles, women muffled up in shawls, came out of their cottages and hurried across the street to hear what their Staroshka

had to say. Some of them carried lanterns whose gleams of light turned the falling rain into sheets of flame.

Clang! clang! All able-bodied men and many women were now assembled in front of the Staroshka's house.

"The Little Father has gone!" Patchenko called out loudly: "We know not where."

"The Little Father gone?" The words passing from mouth to mouth had a sound like long repeated sighs.

"Find him, my children, find him!" Patchenko called again.

But this last call was unnecessary. Already the crowd had dispersed, some going in one direction, some in another, swinging their lanterns, moving like shadows through the gloom. Only the women and a few old men remained huddled together and whispering in front of the house.

When the last of the search-party had gone, the Staroshka, feeling very old and helpless in this stupendous calamity where only the young could render effective aid, went back into the room where stood the vacant bed. The candle was still there on the bedside table, flickering in the draught. Close beside it there was a paper which had been weighted down by the Little Father's prayer book. Patchenko had not noticed the paper before. He took it up now, unfolded it and read:

"I will not have more blood shed on my behalf, or heroic lives sacrificed for me. Farewell, my friends. God bless you and those who have cared for me. My loved ones are calling to me. I go to them."

Patchenko gave a loud cry.

"My God! Take his noble soul into Thy keeping, for Christ's sake, Amen."

He fell on his knees, threw his arms over the bed, and burying his head in the blankets he cried like a child.

They found the dead Tsar just as the dawn was breaking over the distant heights. He had apparently climbed the slope known as Kowolka, on a spur of which there stood a shrine believed to be miraculous. There was an organized pilgrimage to this shrine every year on the 16th July, the anniversary of the day when the Little Mother Tsaritsa and all her children were murdered by the Bolsheviks, and the Little Father Tsar escaped death by a miracle.

Perhaps the Little Father had the desire before he left Varnakieff, mayhap for ever, to pray at the shrine for the repose of the souls of those whom he loved. That, of course, was never known save to Patchenko, who had read the farewell letter and kept its contents buried in his heart. Certain it is that in climbing up the slippery way, Nikolas II, ex-Tsar of all the Russias, must have missed his footing and fallen twenty feet to his death. His body lay cradled between two fir trees, which had stopped its fall to the bottom of the slope, where it would have been injured beyond recognition.

The inmates of the *isba*, situated a couple of hundred yards from the village, had been roused from sleep as the cottage dwellers had been, by the alarm bell on the Staroshka's housetop. At its repeated clangour they, too, donned hastily a few garments and sallied forth into the darkness and the storm. They were strangers to the district for the most part: loyalists who had come to Varnakieff on a pilgrimage to the place of worship where dwelt God's anointed. Sir Nowell and Esther were among those who went out into the open. Nowell had accepted the lantern which the host had most amiably offered him, and the two of them followed the crowd to the Staroshka's house. Esther

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went in, and Nowell joined in with the searchers. He was the first to spy the ex-Tsar's body cradled between the trees. He and a local woodman hauled the body up to the narrow road which bordered the incline, but Nowell stood aside when the Russian expressed the desire to carry his dead Emperor in his arms back to the house of Alexei Patchenko.

They found the Staroshka kneeling in front of the ikon with hands clasped and eyes closed, in earnest prayer. Vera Nikolaiewna Leonow was kneeling beside him. At the first rumour which spread round to the various search-parties that His Majesty had been found, lying dead among the forest trees, she had made haste to get back to the house, so as to be there on the threshold ready to receive in her arms the body of the man whom she worshipped. She had lighted the canonical three candles and disposed them at the bed-head. She had no flowers, but she had gathered great branches of silver birch and larch, and these she laid out on the bed where the body of her beloved would rest. She set a match to the hanging lamp and to as many candles as she could muster until the whole house was a blaze of light. And all the while that she thus busied herself she never shed a tear. Esther Curryer was full of admiration at her self-possession and at her courage. When the girl was satisfied that the two rooms looked as like a temple as she could have wished, she knelt down by the side of the Staroshka in front of the ikon and clasped her hands in prayer. At the first sound of approaching footsteps she rose and opened the front door. Patchenko rose also; from the table drawer he took out a sprinkler and a jar which contained holy water.

The woodman who had carried the dead monarch to the door paused on the threshold. Vera was standing there with her two arms outstretched. At a word from the Staroshka the woodman transferred his precious burden to the girl's arms. The emaciated body of the once mighty Emperor weighed no more than a child's.

Patchenko now dipped the sprinkler into the jar and scattered holy water over the body, after which Vera carried it into the next room and laid it down on the bed of verdure.

As many as could crowded into the bedchamber; men and women: others remained massed in the living-room. Every one knelt and Alexei Fedorovitch Patchenko intoned the prayers for the dead.

NOWELL

CHAPTER XXXVII

ESTHER and Sir Nowell had remained on the fringe of the crowd, deeply touched by all that they had seen. They withdrew into a corner of the living-room close to the front door, and after a time Esther queried in a whisper:

"Nowell, what are we going to do now?"

"There is very little we can do," Nowell replied. "The old Staroshka has said his last word—that he will not leave his people, and I would not insult little Vera by proposing to take her away with us."

"Take her away with us?" Esther echoed, frowning in puzzlement. "Where?"

"We are going to Uskenpol, my dear," he replied with the ghost of a smile, "to look for Johnnie."

Johnnie! Heavens above! Was it really possible that for all these hours she, his sister, had almost ceased to think of him—of Johnnie in the grip of those devils who were trying to make him speak—who were putting him to torture in order to make him tell something that had ceased to be!

The Tsar of all the Russias no longer lived in Varnakieff in the house of Alexei Patchenko.

"Of course, Johnnie doesn't know," Esther faltered vaguely, stupidly.

"Nowell!" she almost cried out as a new—a wonderful—thought forced itself into her brain, "do you think that they will let him go when they know?"

"That is what we've got to find out," he replied simply.

"When do we go?"

"As soon as we have taken leave of the old man and little Vera; I don't want to go till I've had a talk with him."

"Of course not," Esther assented, obviously without much conviction. Her thoughts were fastened on Johnnie now. Nothing else mattered, as far as she was concerned. "Your Tsar!" she had cried out in her agony of mind: "What is your Tsar to me?" And that was more true than ever now. And these poor, fanatical people, they were nothing to her, either. They were marvellous in their courage and their loyalty, and everything had been pathetic and wonderful, but they were nothing to her. Nothing. It was Johnnie who mattered, and only Johnnie, and she hardly heard Nowell's subdued whisper: "I am afraid there may be mischief brewing against them presently."

"You can't do anything," she retorted, "if there is. Can you?"

"I shall have a good try," was all he said in reply.

Before they went, Patchenko took them up to the miraculous shrine on the crest of Kowolka.

"This is where we will bury him," he said. "No cross or stone shall mark this hallowed spot lest one day it should become a prey to desecration at the hands of those human devils. The place will only be recorded in the hearts and memory of all those who loved and believed in him and who were ready to shed their blood in his cause."

They left Varnakieff in the old Citroën just before

noon after an affectionate farewell from Patchenko and little Vera. They asked after Dmitri.

"Will you do us the great favour of taking the lad with you?" Patchenko asked. "There is an important duty which he must fulfil at Uskenpol, and I am sure that he can make himself useful to you on the way. He is a good mechanic and can drive a car."

It was, of course, impossible to refuse, although Esther felt a pang of bitter disappointment at the prospect of a fellow-traveller, for she had looked forward to another couple of days spent alone with Nowell in the beautiful mountainous country. Ffoulkes, on the other hand, assented readily—too readily, was Esther's first thought—and presently Dmitri came along, silent and diffident as always. Esther gave Vera a last loving hug and Patchenko an affectionate handshake. He assured her that the special prayers for her brother would be said daily until Dmitri returned with the good news that all was well with him and his devoted sister.

The three of them then walked up to the *isba*, where the host had prepared a simple meal for them. They picked up their belongings and a few provisions for the journey. Nowell took the wheel and Dmitri sat beside him. The host and guests of the *isba* all congregated outside the house to see them start. There were many expressions of sympathy, a great number of handshakes and floods of tears. The death of the Little Father Tsar had cast a gloom over all these loyalists, and there would follow days of sorrow and of prayer while the terrible news was disseminated throughout the whole of South-Eastern Russia and to the wandering tribes of the steppes.

To the accompaniment of whole-hearted farewells, Esther and Nowell looked their last upon the scene of one of the most pathetic tragedies the world has ever known. To many it was the awakening from a hopeful and happy dream: the destruction of a cherished illusion. God had by a miracle saved the Little Father Tsar from the bullet of assassins and allowed him to wander freely

among the people whom he had learned to love, and who had loved and reverenced him as they had never done when he was the great and mighty Emperor at whose frown half the world trembled. God had restored him to his people, only to take him away again. Why had God done that? This was a question which, for many years after that, troubled the simple faith of these guileless people. What was His purpose? For there is a purpose in all things, even in the brief passage on earth of every created man, be he king or peasant.

Thoughts such as these came and went in Esther Curryer's mind during the three days and two nights of the journey to Uskenpol, while she sat huddled in the old car, gazing on Nowell's broad back, wondering what he was thinking of all the time. There was not, alas! the same intimacy with him on this second journey as there had been on the first. Though Dmitri was the most discreet fellow-traveller imaginable, and whenever there was a halt made himself scarce so as not to be in the way, his presence nevertheless was a jarring note in the perfect harmony of this peaceful wayfaring. At night after he had put together close to Nowell's hand a large provision of wood, he plunged into the forest and was only seen stealing back from time to time to feed the camp fire.

In the morning of the third day, after taking in a provision of petrol at a wayside *isba* and going on for a couple of versts after that, Ffoulkes brought the car to a halt. During the previous night he had once more assumed the guise of the one-eyed, shaggy chauffeur, a change which, when he made his first appearance in the early morning, drew an exclamation of dismay not only from Esther, who always hated to see him look so sinister, but even from the stolidly silent Dmitri. He now came to the door of the car, opened it and asked Esther to get out, which she did at once.

"Don't look at me," he said as soon as she stood in the road beside him, "only listen. We are only six

miles from Uskenpol, and you will have to do the rest of the journey without me. . . .”

“Nowell! No!” she cried out protesting.

He put up an admonitory hand and continued gravely: “My dear, it has got to be, for we must concentrate on Johnnie’s future now, mustn’t we?”

“Yes!” she said quietly, for the two words “Johnnie’s future” had at once steadied her. “Yes! Go on.”

“Everything will be all right,” he assured her. “If I was not certain of that I shouldn’t leave you. But Dmitri is going to look after you. After the first mile or so you will turn into the main road. There will be more people about than on these side tracks, and one or two vehicles of sorts will be sure to be going by. Anyone who is driving will give you a lift if you show them a rouble or two. But what I want to know is: supposing you can’t get a lift, are you prepared to walk the whole way? Six miles, but once you are on the main road the going won’t be too bad.”

“I don’t care how bad it is,” she interposed simply, “if, as you say, it is for the good of Johnnie.”

“It would not be for the good of Johnnie if you and I were . . . detained together. That is why I am leaving you.”

“Detained?” she exclaimed involuntarily, but quickly pulled herself together and enquired calmly: “Do you mean arrested?”

“That also may happen, my dearest. Are you prepared?”

“Yes!” she replied calmly.

“The spy,” Nowell then went on, “who has been trying by all sorts of means to learn the truth about the late Tsar, is now in Uskenpol. It may be a part of his plan to have you arrested, or it may not. We don’t know. But so long as you are prepared . . .”

“I am prepared,” she reiterated simply.

“And you are going to trust me to see you and Johnnie safely out of this trouble?”

Esther closed her eyes. She wished to dismiss from

her mind the fearsome-looking, one-eyed Bolshevik; what she wanted was to visualise Nowell himself, her Nowell with the earnest, kind eyes and the smiling face, and his lips which were so sweet when they kissed. When she had done that she said the one word, "Absolutely," gave him both her hands and had the delight, all too short, alas! of feeling his lips pressed against her palms.

Esther and Dmitri started off to walk to Uskenpol, six miles away. Dmitri carried Esther's small suitcase and his own heavy stick. He had no other chattels, but his old service revolver and his hunting-knife were safely tucked away in his belt.

Nowell remained standing in the road by the side of the old Citroën for as long as he could catch sight of Esther moving away in the distance. Not once did she look back. She wouldn't do it, for she was quite sure that if she did she would immediately turn and run back to him, which would have been a very undignified proceeding in front of this young, stolid Russian. But she kept her ears strained, and even came to a halt, from time to time, listening for the grinding sound of the car when Nowell started off again. She had not asked him where he was going, because she felt quite sure that she would see him again very soon and that everything would be all right whatever trouble might arise.

NOWELL

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE wayfarers got a lift in a passing public vehicle which plied between Uskenpol and the neighbouring villages. It put them down along with their fellow passengers in the centre of a large open square, on one side of which was the railway station and on the other the municipal building where Esther had to go to get her passport. She knew the place from her former visit in Uskenpol, and, with Dmitri close beside her carrying her suitcase, she went across to the municipality, a large, straggling building adorned by a red flag waving above the entrance door. Fortunately the weather kept fine.

A soldier, in very shabby uniform and very muddy boots, stood on guard outside the building. In answer to Esther's enquiry he pointed the way with a very dirty thumb to the open door behind him. It gave on a large, bare, unventilated hall already full of people, a heterogeneous crowd; *moujiks*, miners and factory workers, and a number of women and children. Esther, when she was here last had, as soon as she had given her name and presented her passport, been shown into the police inspector's office. The formalities had been expeditious and been carried through with a certain amount of courtesy. She expected the same treatment this time, made her way through the crowd, always followed closely by Dmitri, to the other end of the hall, where another soldier in an equally shabby uniform was standing guard in front of a closed door. This door, she remembered, gave on the inspector's office. She mentioned her name and errand to the soldier and requested an immediate interview with the inspector. The man, however, appeared both deaf and dumb: he neither looked at her when she spoke, nor made

the slightest response to her enquiries. When she tried to push past him, he put his bayonet across the door. Except for that one gesture he stood motionless, the perfect embodiment of Russian stolidity. After a time she was obliged to give it up.

Dmitri, in the meanwhile, after much manœuvring, had contrived to clear a place on one of the benches that lined the walls of the hall. When Esther finally turned away from the stolid soldier, she caught his eye. He beckoned to her to come and sit down, which she did with a sigh of relief, for she was tired out. Dmitri put the suitcase down by the side of her.

A lot more people came in from time to time and soon the place became suffocatingly hot. From desultory grumblings indulged in by her fellow-sufferers, Esther gathered that a train was expected in, which was several hours overdue, and most of the crowd here were waiting for permits to continue their journey east.

And so Esther was kept waiting, waiting interminably, just as Johnnie had waited in this self-same place a little over two months ago. This, of course, she did not know. She just sat on, on the very hard bench, steeling herself to wait patiently. Every now and then the door of the inspector's office was opened from the inside, and a voice from the room called out a name, which was repeated in a stentorian voice by the soldier on guard. The owner of the name was then allowed to pass through into the office. But the name was never Esther's. At one time a man in civilian clothes appeared in the doorway. Esther recognised him as the official to whom she had surrendered her passport on her way out to Ufelgrad. She tried to catch his eye and even called to him, but he took no notice of her, and even turned, deliberately she thought, his back on her. Evidently, then, this cavalier treatment of her was intentional, and the poor girl wondered what this could mean. The official had been extraordinarily amiable and polite before. However, she was armed with patience and the will

not to allow anything to frighten her. Her thoughts remained firmly fixed on Nowell and the last words which he spoke to her before they parted on the high road: "And you are going to trust me to see you and Johnnie safely out of this trouble?" With these words in her mind and the trust she had in him, she was able to control the feeling of alarm which, as the afternoon wore on, began to weigh her spirits down.

Esther had been kept waiting close on three hours when at last she heard her name called, and the soldier, nodding in her direction, ushered her into the inspector's office. He was the same man whom she had met before, but he gave her no glance of recognition. He was sitting at a table which was littered with papers and with a number of passports piled up on the top of the other close to his hands. As soon as Esther entered the room he picked up one of the passports. It was hers. He threw it back on the table, and then only did he look at Esther.

"You were ordered to come and fetch your passport last Tuesday," he demanded harshly. "Why didn't you?"

He was evidently in a very different temper to what he had been ten days ago. He never asked her to sit down—as a matter of fact there was no chair in the room except the one which he occupied, only a rickety bench propped against the wall. His manner was gruff, even deliberately insolent, so she thought, wondering what this portended. However, in spite of a vague sense of apprehension she answered quite calmly:

"I was a little longer on the way back than I intended. I didn't think these two or three days were of any consequence."

"Every movement of you foreign intruders is of consequence in Russia. Why you come here at all we don't know; but when you do, you must learn

to respect our laws, our rules and regulations: one of these," he concluded drily, "is punctuality."

Punctuality! Esther, remembering her experiences on Russian railways often unpunctual by several hours, could not help smiling to herself. But all she said was:

"I can assure you, comrade, that I had no intention whatever of transgressing against your laws."

"Then why did you not present yourself here last Tuesday instead of to-day?"

"The weather," Esther replied, "was so beautiful and the country round so enticing, that I was tempted to drive about and see some of it."

"Well! you'll have to give that explanation to the Chief Administrator of Police," said the inspector with a sneer. "I don't know what he will say to it. To me it sounds very lame. I don't know: he may think otherwise. He is absent for the next day or two. In the meanwhile you can go to an hotel in this town. There are two both quite respectable, and you will hold yourself at the Administrator's disposal until he sends for you."

The words "Administrator of Police" had, despite her strenuous effort to keep calm and brave, struck like ice against Esther's heart. She uttered a quick word of protest:

"But, comrade, on what charge. . . .?"

"You will learn that from the Chief Administrator when he sends for you."

"I protest . . ."

"You do, do you?" the man retorted with a short laugh. "But you see, Comrade Esther Curryer, I have no time to listen to your protest."

He touched a hand-bell on the table. From another door, one on his left, a man wearing a huge grey over-coat down to his heels and a peaked cap on his head, entered the room and stood at attention while the inspector gave him his orders.

"You will conduct this person," the latter said,

"to the Hotel Uljanof. If they haven't room for her there take her to the Odessa. In either case you will give this letter to the proprietor of the hotel."

He held out a sealed envelope to the man in the grey coat, who took it from him. He then cast another lowering glance on Esther and said harshly:

"Follow the sergeant. And, mind, no resistance. It will be best for you if you go quietly."

To this last piece of gratuitous insolence Esther vouchsafed no reply. How could she, a woman and a stranger, offer resistance to the police, even if such a mad thought had entered her head? She swallowed her indignation, and when the police sergeant gave her a peremptory nod, she walked steadily and with head erect out of the room.

The sergeant followed her and closed the door behind him.

"To the right, comrade," he commanded. And Esther, without a word, turned that way down a long corridor, which led first to a courtyard and then through various doors and several passages, until she found herself in the open in a narrow street at the side of the building with the police sergeant always close to her heels. Here a shabby-looking car stood waiting. The sergeant called to the chauffeur and ordered Esther to get into the car, which she did without demur. He got in with her. She was driven to the Hotel Uljanof, a sorry-looking house with soiled curtains behind very dirty windows.

The sergeant got out of the car after ordering her to remain where she was. He went into the hotel, came out a few minutes later and opened the door of the car.

"You can go in," he said curtly. "They have a room for you."

Esther got down. She said to the sergeant: "I have a few things in a suitcase which I shall need. The boy who was with me in the municipality has charge of the case."

"You shall have your things," was all the man said in reply, and closed the door of the car behind her. He followed Esther into the hotel. The proprietor was standing in the hall with a woman, who might, Esther thought, be his wife; he had the letter from the inspector in his hand. There ensued a short whispered conversation between the woman and the two men, during which Esther caught more than one contemptuous glance cast on her by the three of them. After a time the proprietor of the hotel turned to her and said:

"Your room and food will cost you two English pounds per day. Until your bill is presented to you and paid, you will leave all the money that you have in my charge. How much have you?"

"I decline to tell you," Esther responded coolly, "and I deny your right to question me."

The man laughed. It was a way these people seemed to have: nasty, cruel, mocking laughs, calculated to exacerbate the nerves of those unfortunates who were helpless and in their power. But Esther had learned by now her lesson of self-control, and all she said was:

"Please show me my room. I agree to your terms."

"That's all right, comrade," the man returned, with a shrug. "My wife will show you your room. She and our comrade Anastasia Ivanowna, who helps us in the house, will see what money you have on you . . . money," he added with a leer, "and other things."

He then called out at the top of his voice: "Anastasia Ivanowna, a customer for you." Before Esther could gather her wits together in face of this outrage, a woman appeared at the top of the stairs. She was a large-boned, hefty peasant, with huge hands that looked as if she could wrestle with a bullock, and sleeves rolled up above red, muscular arms. Esther shuddered when she pictured herself in the grip of these two females, for the mistress was no less brawny than the maid. Resistance was, of course, out of the question, and protests would only fall on deaf ears. She held

out her handbag to the proprietor who took it with a grin on his face. He emptied out its contents on a bureau which stood close by. There were some two hundred pounds in English bank and Treasury notes, and credit-notes on a Moscow bank for another fifteen hundred. The man counted out the money in front of Esther, put it all back into the handbag, which he then deposited in a drawer of the bureau. This he locked and thrust the key in his pocket.

After this he made out a receipt for the money and ostentatiously handed it over to Esther. She took it, well knowing what a farce this receipt would probably prove to be. It was her turn to indulge in a sarcastic laugh, which drew a frown and a rebuke from the master of the house:

"Your money is as safe with me," he said loftily, "as in your thievish English banks. And now," he added more benignly, "come! I will show you your room."

The room was, as usual in this country, insufferably stuffy; but the throwing open of the two large windows would soon remedy that. Looking round as soon as she entered, Esther noted with great satisfaction that the place looked clean. Anastasia Ivanowna's powerful hands had wielded broom and duster to some purpose, and the horror of filthy surroundings would not be added to the dainty English girl's cup of martyrdom. She registered an earnest prayer that privacy would be an additional boon. She certainly was left alone now. The proprietor and his wife had already gone and Anastasia Ivanowna, after bringing her water to wash in and water to drink, was ready to follow them. Before going she remarked quite pleasantly:

"I will bring you some food three times every day. It is good food. I always cook it myself. This room is not what you capitalists are used to, I daresay. It is not luxury. But, anyway, it is better than the municipal gaol."

Left to herself Esther had another good look round. The bed was certainly clean and the sheets dry, and what's more they were of fine linen, looted in all probability from a raided château, for they and the pillow-case were adorned with large embroidered monogram and coronet. Esther, tired out mentally as well as physically, took off her hat and, after locking the door, she lay down on the bed. Up to now she had had no time to think. After that interminable, weary wait in the crowded hall of the municipality, events came upon her with a rush: first the interview with the police inspector, her arrest, the theft of her money—for that was what it came to—and the way in which she had been treated from first to last had brought, not only confusion to her mind, but also, in spite of that will-power of which she used to be so proud, an unusual feeling of impotence.

Virtually a prisoner of the hostile Soviets, deprived of her money, what was she going to do? What could she do for Johnnie? What could Nowell do for him and for her? Strangely enough at this stage of her reflections her thoughts suddenly went off at a tangent and centred upon Miguel Alvalho. From the moment when she left London she had put him and her promise to him, as it were, clean out of her mind. She had acted behind his back and, to a great extent, treacherously towards him. Was her breach of faith about to find her out? Would she live to rue the day when she deceived him, and embarked upon this journey of which she knew that he would have sternly disapproved? Strange that thoughts of him should obtrude themselves upon her at this moment, when for the first time in her life she felt utterly helpless. What did he do when he found her letter and realised that she had given him the slip? Did he at once decide to follow her—to track her down to this place and carry her back by force to England? He was so rich, he could do anything in Russia where hands were stretched out all the time for bakshish. And she already knew

from experience how easy it was to get on the tracks of a traveller in this country of out-at-elbows officials and endless regulations and permits. Nowell had got on hers quickly enough.

This new terror of Miguel's possible appearance here so obsessed her now that when, after a time, there came a peremptory knock at the door, her heart gave a jump which nearly suffocated her, and she sat up in bed panting, almost paralysed. The knock was repeated, and a harsh voice called from the other side of the door:

"Your things, comrade. A boy brought them." It was the voice of Anastasia Ivanowna: a more welcome sound could not have come to Esther's ears at this moment. She rose and opened the door. The woman handed her her suitcase and went off again. Of course, the lock of the case had been broken open; equally, of course, all its contents had been turned over and over, but nothing of importance was missing, and Esther would not have minded even if it had: her relief was so great!

THE rest of the day and the ensuing night passed off uneventfully. Esther never kept a clear recollection of either. Anastasia Ivanowna brought her food in the evening, and tea and bread in the morning. She slept intermittently during the night, and rose feeling stronger, both mentally and physically: her terrors, her vague sense of alarm, her thoughts of Miguel and of what he might do, all vanished with

the dawn. It was a grey dawn with an equinoctial gale roaring down the chimney of the huge porcelain stove and rattling the windows in their ramshackle frames. The clouds overhead were threatening to come down, and they did, too, in the course of the morning.

At one hour after noon Esther was summoned to go downstairs. The police sergeant in the grey over-coat was in the hall waiting for her. He had a car at the door and curtly ordered her to get in. She was driven to the municipality, and this time she was ushered immediately into the office of Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff, Chief Administrator of Police, an elderly man with tousled dark hair, greying at the temples, and a shaggy beard—a typical Russian of the new Republic; obviously a jack-in-office, risen from servitude to officialdom; his demeanour was arrogant, his voice hectoring. The inspector was sitting near him at the table, which, as usual, was littered with papers and a piled-up number of passports. At a nod from the inspector the sergeant of police went away, and Esther was left standing, while the two officials went on discussing various uninteresting matters—the failure of the root crop, the cost of imported motor-cars, and so on—ignoring her presence altogether: studied insolence, again, but Esther was proof against such pin-pricks by now.

At last the Administrator condescended to take notice of her. He rested his elbow on the table, cupped his bearded chin in his hand, and threw a frowning, inquisitorial glance on the girl.

“Your name——” he began, and as if to refresh his memory looked down on a passport which the inspector had thrust under his nose, “is Esther Curryer?”

“It is,” she replied.

“And you are the sister of a man named John Curryer, who has come under the notice of the Commissar of Police for espionage.”

At mention of Johnnie Esther had given a gasp.

She waited a moment or two to recover her breath and then said calmly:

"I am the sister of Mr. John Curryer, who, like myself, is a British subject and who is, therefore, under the immediate protection of the British Government. He is not a spy and has never done any spying in all his life."

"That is as it may be," the Administrator retorted dryly; "the fact remains that he has been in direct communication with an imposter who pretends to be the ex-tyrant, known before his execution as the Tsar—or Emperor—I really forget which; and it has come to my knowledge that you, Esther Curryer, have also been in communication with that impostor. Do you deny that?"

"I do—absolutely. I know nothing of any impostor who pretends to be the Tsar, and I am perfectly sure that my brother knows nothing about such a person, either."

The administrator cast a long, searching glance on Esther. Without making any further remark he opened the table drawer and brought out a snapshot, which the inspector then took from him and held out for Esther to look at.

"Who is that?" she was asked.

With wonderful presence of mind she replied at once:

"The King of England."

Whereupon the inspector's eyelids went up almost to the roots of his hair. But the Administrator only gave a shrug; he took the snapshot from the inspector and threw it back into the table drawer.

"Is it usual," he asked with a sneer, "for English tourists to carry about with them a snapshot of their tyrant?"

"Quite usual. We are very much attached to our King, who is the friend of us all and not a tyrant."

"Is that so?" the Russian countered dryly, and once more started a conversation with the inspector. Their talk this time was of agriculture and of the exportation

of furs. Esther might not have been there for all the notice they took of her. She tried to master her impatience. She had had a good deal of experience in that line recently and all she did was to put in a word of protest from time to time: "I must insist," or: "You have not the right," or again: "I wish to communicate with the British Delegate in Moscow——"

But her every protest was ostentatiously ignored until suddenly a question was literally shot out at her by the Administrator.

"You were staying last week in the house of some people called Rabrinski in Ufelgrad, weren't you?"

"Yes," she replied, "I was."

"You hired a car from Comrade Golouzow's garage and drove out there."

"That is so."

"And you left Ufelgrad in the same car last Tuesday week."

"Yes," she said, and wondered in her mind who it was at Ufelgrad who had spied out her departure from there, and how much more of her movements was known to this Administrator of Police. Nothing about her drive to Varnakieff, thank God! This had already been made clear by the turn which his questions had taken from the first: Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff was not challenging her with a statement of facts, he was trying to get information out of her.

"You were to have come straight here to get your passport. Why didn't you?" he demanded.

"As I explained to the inspector——"

The man brought his fist down on the table with a crash.

"Never mind what you explained to the inspector," he snarled. "You are going to tell me where you spent the time between last Tuesday, which was the 23rd, and yesterday, which was the 27th."

"Driving about," she replied coolly.

"Driving about?" he gibed. "Where?"

"I don't know. I just wanted to see the country,

so I told the chauffeur to show me the beauty spots."

"The beauty spots, eh?" he echoed with a malicious leer. "And where did you spend the nights when you couldn't see beauty spots? With the chauffeur?"

Esther ignored the insult. It was too utterly vile. She said coldly:

"At some very nice *isbas* in villages."

"What villages?"

"How should I know?" she retorted. "The names of the villages did not interest me; the landscapes did."

"And the chauffeur drove you where you wanted to go?"

"He certainly did. The country round Ufelgrad is very beautiful."

"Where is that amiable chauffeur now?"

"I don't know."

"You don't seem to know much, do you, Comrade Esther Curryer?" Samartzieff remarked with a sneer.

"The chauffeur put me down on the main road about ten versts from here. He wouldn't drive me any further. I believe his engine gave out."

"Did he leave you stranded on the high road, all alone? That was not very gallant of him, was it?"

"I was not alone; there was a lad with us."

"What lad?"

"You must have seen him, Comrade Administrator. He was the boy who carried my suitcase and brought it to me to the hotel."

"Where did he come from?"

"We picked him up on the way. He was tramping to Uskenpol and appeared done up. The chauffeur gave him a lift."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know."

"As I said before, Comrade Esther Curryer, you don't seem to know much," the Administrator concluded dryly, and turned to his subordinate without bestowing another glance on Esther.

"We had better put this woman somewhere where her memory will be stimulated," he said with a short laugh. "See to it, Ivan Grigorovitch."

And the same process went on as it did the day before. The inspector touched a hand-bell and the same police sergeant in the long grey overcoat came in and awaited orders.

"Room No. 11," the inspector said curtly. "Second class."

As far as Esther was able to ascertain, the gaol formed the ground floor of the municipal building. Its iron-barred, tiny windows gave on the courtyard which she had traversed the day before.

Anastasia Ivanowna had been quite right when she said that the room in the Hotel Uljanof was better than the municipal gaol. Esther's prison was just a room twelve feet square, whitewashed from floor to ceiling, and furnished with a truckle bed, a deal table, a chair and very primitive appurtenances for her toilet. With every desire to make the best of her unfortunate position, her heart sank heavily when she was shut into this place, which was stuffy with that cold airlessness which is so much more trying than the hot kind. The position did indeed appear as dismal as it could possibly be, for the prospect of being useful to Johnnie suddenly appeared to her now as a mere chimera, a futile and ridiculous conception of an illogical brain. The Soviet octopus had reached forth its immense tentacles and seized upon Johnnie and herself; it would never let go till it had destroyed them both.

The one solace which the poor girl had in the midst of her misery was her faith in God and her trust in Nowell; indeed, these two deep feelings in her were one and the same. "God and Nowell!" she kept repeating to herself over and over again during those terribly wearisome hours of the day and the night: "God save me! God help Nowell to come to me!"

It was not till the afternoon of the next day that she

was summoned again into the presence of the Administrator of Police. Never in all her life had she felt so humiliated. She was inexpressibly tired, for she had hardly slept at all during the past two nights, and as her ablutions had been necessarily sketchy, she had the horrible feeling of looking grimy and draggle-tailed. She was received by the Administrator and his subordinate with the same studied insolence as before. She was kept standing facing them for more than ten minutes while they carried on a whispered conversation together, intermingled with loud guffaws from the one and an occasional obsequious giggle from the other. Esther waited patiently until laughter and conversation came to a halt, when she uttered a vigorous protest, which passed entirely unheeded.

"I must insist," she began, "that I be at once given facility to communicate with the British Legation in Moscow. I am a British subject, and you have no right whatever to detain me or to deny me access to the representatives of my country."

As far as the two men were concerned, she might not have been there for all the notice that they took of her. Neither of them vouchsafed her a single glance, did not as much as look up when she raised her voice. It was not till nearly a quarter of an hour had gone by that the Administrator at last turned to face her; but even then he did not address her until after he and the inspector had each poured out for himself a mug of *piva* from a stone jug on the table. Peter Samartzieff having wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then said abruptly:

"I suppose you know, Comrade Esther Curryer, that we have your brother here under arrest."

"Yes, I knew that he was under arrest. I didn't know that he was here. I wish to see him at once; and again I must insist that—"

The Administrator brought his fist down with a crash upon the table. It was a favourite gesture of his, apparently designed either to assert his authority

as noisily as possible or else to upset the nerves of his unfortunate prisoners.

"If you go on insisting," he declared with a harsh laugh, "I will have you transferred to Ufa, where you will not get the chance of seeing that precious brother of yours at all. Let me tell you at once that I am tired of your insistings and your protests. I will not allow you to communicate with any British capitalists, whether they are delegates or spies or what-nots. Is that clear?"

Esther remained silent. The man's shouts and bangs upon the table did not intimidate her in the least. What did frighten her was his threat to transfer her to Ufa, where she would have no chance of seeing Johnnie. Because of this threat she remained silent, waiting to hear when that blessed moment would come when she would be allowed to see him. The Administrator now went on:

"Your brother is kept under arrest, and so are you because of your obstinacy. Now I know that you capitalists who are used to being tyrannized over by other capitalists with more money than yourselves, that you think of us free working Russians as some kind of ogres. Now I am going to prove to you that we are, above all things, straight and just: but we insist on the respect of our laws. These laws you and your brother have flouted. You have had communication with a man who is an impostor and a rebel—— Don't interrupt me!" the man thundered as Esther was on the point of breaking in: "The man whose photo I have shown you is not the King of England. He is an impostor who trades on his accidental likeness to the ex-tyrant of Russia, and incites our soldiers to treachery and our workers to rebellion. He must be brought to justice and he will be, let me tell you. You and all your English spies and busybodies may do what you like, but he will get his deserts in the end."

"What do you mean exactly by that?" Esther asked coolly, when the Administrator paused in his long

peroration for want of breath and refreshed himself with a mug of *piva*. He put the empty mug down and said dryly:

"The hangman's rope, comrade."

"There you are wrong," she retorted forcibly.

"How do you mean, I am wrong?"

"The man whom you are pursuing with your hatred is beyond your reach."

"Oh, he is, is he?" gibed the Administrator. "Do you mean that he is dead?"

"I meant just what I said," she replied coolly.

The Administrator and his subordinate exchanged a quick glance. The former's glance was one of triumph, that of the other one of obsequious flattery. Was the prisoner about to speak? Was she about to give up the secret which for the past two months they had vainly tried to wrest from her brother? Had the past forty-eight hours brought her to her senses? It looked like it, certainly. Another turn or two of the screw and she would blurt out everything, as women nearly always do when the screw is applied by a clever and energetic man. If this should happen, what a triumph for the newly-appointed Administrator of Police! What a tribute to his acumen! Promotion loomed suddenly largely ahead: two arrests followed by confessions would certainly be bruited throughout the country, and Moscow, hearing of it, would know how to reward so able an official.

Both the men had another drink of *piva* on this. They pledged one another, clicking their mugs. The Administrator gave a complacent laugh. He rolled his tongue round in his mouth, licking his chops as a dog does when it has had a good feed. He picked up the photo again, had a good look at it, smirked and nodded, and laid a flattering unction to his soul: he really had conducted this affair with remarkable skill.

"Of course," he now resumed, and spoke quite benignly, "when you implied in words, which I would call treasonable, that the ex-tyrant had already paid

the penalty of his crimes, you did not tell us anything that we did not know. The justice of our free and enlightened country overtook him and his brood four years ago. I don't want to hear anything about that. What I want to know, and what you are going to tell me like a good English girl, is how your brother came to take this photo, and where he did it."

And saying this he smacked the photo with the back of his hand and looked up at Esther with a benevolent smile.

"I have said all that I meant you to know," she replied coolly.

Nor would she utter another word after that. The Administrator plied her with questions, tried to wear down her resistance for close upon an hour, but she remained obstinately silent. A word or a look might betray her secret, for this man was as tenacious as a terrier worrying a rat. But there were Patchenko and Vera and all the loyal souls at Varnakieff to think of. The Tsar was dead and beyond the reach of their blood-lust, but those others were still there, the certain victims of these people's cruelty and bitter feeling of revenge.

Irritated by the girl's obstinacy, her tormentor grew more and more virulent. Where did she spend the intervening days between her departure from Ufelgrad and her arrival here? he asked over and over again. Four days! Where did she spend them?

"I insist upon knowing!" he shouted at the top of his voice, and banged repeatedly on the table with the palm of his hand. "And let me tell you this: that neither you nor your precious brother will leave this place until you have answered my question. Where did you spend those four days?"

Esther gave a shrug and broke her silence:

"I have already told you. I drove about the country."

"Where did you spend the nights?"

"I don't remember."

Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff said nothing for a minute or two. He looked at the inspector and the inspector looked at him. They appeared to be consulting with one another. Finally the Administrator gave what seemed a nod of approval, and the inspector then rose and left the room.

"We'll see," the other said, "how best we can jog your memory."

He took no more notice of Esther after that, had a drink of *piva*, lighted a cigar, took up pen and paper and appeared absorbed in writing. Esther waited with beating heart and as much patience as she could muster.

Suddenly the door facing her was opened. The inspector came in and behind him Johnnie, followed by the sergeant of police.

"Johnnie!" Esther cried out and ran to him, heedless of her surroundings, of those three men, of anything and everything except of Johnnie, who at sight of her put out his arms. She fell into them with a suppressed sob. She only saw him through a veil of tears, but what she did see of him nearly brought out another pitiful cry from her heart. He looked ill, thin, miserable, like herself draggle-tailed and grimy, with uncut hair and shaggy beard. Johnnie! who was always so smart and so well-groomed, so ready to laugh and so quick at a joke. Esther wiped her eyes as quickly as she could. She had suddenly remembered where she was, had become aware of those two men and their cruel, sneering faces. They were scrutinising her and Johnnie, reckoning what capital they could make out of her distress and out of the love for him which her emotion had betrayed. She freed herself from his clinging arms, and brother and sister held one another for a moment by the hands. Johnnie was the first to speak, and he did it with an unforced laugh:

"I say, darling, we do look a pair of beauties, don't we?"

And they both laughed, like two children caught in a prank. And the Russians looked at one another and shrugged: "These English are really astounding!" one of them murmured.

Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff indulged in a prolonged guffaw.

"What did I tell you?" he queried good-humouredly. "We are not the ogres you and all capitalists believe that we are. See how I have brought you two love-birds together; and what's more there is no reason why you should not both be travelling to Moscow not later than to-morrow with your passports and your money in your pockets, and be back in your God-forsaken country in a week. Eh? What?" he concluded with his benevolent smile: "How do you like that cheering prospect?"

"I know what they want," Esther said to Johnnie in English.

"So do I," he answered her, "but we won't tell them."

"Rather not," she agreed.

Brother and sister were standing close to one another holding hands. Each gave the other a reassuring squeeze.

"I don't understand your heathenish language," the Administrator broke in gruffly, even though he continued to smile; "but I am sure that you have both come to your senses by now. You know what I want from either of you. I don't care which, but one of you has got to tell me how this photo came to be taken, and where. As I said before, we are not ogres, we Russians, but we do not condone espionage, and we won't have English busybodies meddling in our affairs. We call such meddling 'treason,' and we punish it with the utmost severity of our laws. Now which of you is going to give me the first proof of loyalty and common sense? How came this photo to be taken, and where?"

Esther and Johnnie looked at one another. Neither of them spoke.

A quarter of an hour later both had been escorted back to their respective prison cells.

NOWELL

CHAPTER XL

AN extraordinary thing with regard to Esther's reaction to her present serious plight was the fact that her thoughts reverted quite as often to Miguel Alvalho as to Nowell Ffoulkes. Nowell was, of course, in the forefront, but she had hoped by now to have received some sort of indication from him that he was at work on Johnnie's behalf and on hers. Not that she did not trust him. She did. Absolutely. She never wavered in her belief in his resourcefulness and his courage; never for a moment did she doubt him. What she did doubt was his power to get her and Johnnie out of this desperate situation.

These men here with whom he had to deal were tenacious and slippery. What they wanted they wanted desperately, and Esther was quite shrewd enough to realise that the two police officials who held her fate and Johnnie's in their grimy hands were out for a spectacular finish to the ex-Tsar's Odyssey of the past two years. Failing the capture of Nikolas II, who was now beyond the reach of their hatred, the exemplary punishment of those who had aided and sheltered him would both satisfy their blood-lust and bring about golden opinions from Moscow, with something substantial in the way of promotion or what-not. How could a man like Nowell Ffoulkes cope with the perfidy

and the lies and shufflings of these people? And had he sufficient influence to bring the whole weight of the British Government to bear on their injustice and perversion of the truth? By the time the ponderous machinery of diplomacy had been set in motion, would she and Johnnie have been as effectually wiped off the face of the earth as other countless victims of the Soviet's class-hatred and inhumanity?

But in among Esther's thoughts of Nowell others obtruded themselves—thoughts of Miguel Alvalho, of his wealth, his obvious influence and power, as well as that strong, almost savage, will-power of his which pushed through every obstacle and brooked no opposition. She did not exactly wish for his presence, hardly for his help, but, much against her will, she kept on thinking about it, wondering where he was, whether he would come in pursuit of her and whether that fierce love which he had for her had survived the severe shock of what he would call her "treachery." And as the night broke into morning, and the morning wore on, these thoughts of him became so insistent that she began to feel as if he were actually near her, and that she was talking with him not in a dream but in reality.

When the door of her prison cell was opened and a police sergeant entered, ushering in Miguel Alvalho, Esther felt no shock of surprise, only a sudden sense of foreboding, a nameless dread, as if his presence, now that he was really here, was the presage of some awful calamity. This sense, however, she quickly mastered, and even contrived to rise and to receive him as calmly as she would have done in her boudoir in Egerton Crescent.

Miguel took off his hat, put it down on the table, then seized her limp hand and raised it to his lips. While he murmured in his usual ardent way: "My beautiful, my beautiful!" and the sergeant went out of the room, all she could do was to falter stupidly:

"Miguel! you shouldn't have come."

He looked up smiling into her face and said lightly:

"How could I help it, knowing you were here?

You didn't imagine, my lovely one, that I would leave you in this awful country all alone a day longer than I could help?"

"But how . . .?" she murmured faintly.

"How did it all come about? I will tell you. But don't let me keep you standing; and if you will allow me . . ."

He moved the chair for her to the side of the truckle-bed; she sat down, and he sat on the bed.

"May I smoke?" he asked casually, and at a nod from her, took out his cigarette-case.

"Won't you?" he went on, and offered the case to her. She was longing for a cigarette, but for some reason or other she refused to take one. While he lighted his she remained silent.

"Tell me, Miguel," she said at last, "does your coming mean that you can, and will, do something for Johnnie?"

"Primarily for you, my beautiful," he replied. "You are in just as bad a plight as your brother."

With a sweep of the hand he seemed to indicate the squalid appearance of the prison cell.

"The first thing I have to think of," he went on with a smile, "is to get you out of this, and then safely back to England."

"You should know me well enough by now, Miguel," she retorted, "to realise that nothing will move me from here unless Johnnie comes too."

He made no reply to this, puffed away at his cigarette for a few moments, and then said with complete irrelevance:

"I arrived in London on the morning of the 18th, the day before what I thought would be the happiest day of my life. I had flown over from Paris at day-break. . . ."

He paused for a moment or two before he went on:

"Can you even remotely conceive what my feelings were when I read your letter?"

"I tried," she replied gently, "to put my case before you, frankly, as one friend to another. Remember," she urged, "that I spoke to you about my fears for Johnnie. You would not listen to me. You didn't understand how I felt about it all. And I was afraid that if I spoke to you about my wanting to go to Russia you would have put every possible hindrance in my way. Wouldn't you . . . Miguel?"

Her tone was one of appeal, gentle, mellow. In spite of her surroundings and of her miserable condition she still looked beautiful. He cast a long, hungering look on her and said:

"If you had waited one short week you could have come out with me as my wife."

She shook her head.

"Do you remember," she said, "one day when we were discussing our honeymoon and you had made all arrangements about my passport, do you remember saying then: 'I have got all the necessary visas for you except the Russian, but I would never take you to that abominable country'?"

"So you thought," he rejoined with a sarcastic curl of his full lips, "that you could give me the slip?"

Then, as she remained silent, he shook his head and continued:

"No, my dear, you couldn't do that. I have the greatest possible respect for your intelligence, but this time it was at fault. A matter of understanding, I suppose. You just didn't realise what a man in love will do when he has been mocked and cheated."

"Miguel!" she protested hotly.

"Mocked and cheated," he reiterated harshly, "that's what you did to me, you poor, helpless, weak little woman; to me who . . ."

He pulled himself abruptly together, and then went on: "After I had taken in the full extent of your guile, I was struck down senseless, like a bull that has been

felled by a hammer blow. For five days I was at grips with Death, but my will to see you was so great that I remained the victor. Your letter told me that you had gone to Russia. To Russia, my God! You, so beautiful, so young, in this land of lawlessness! How I thanked my lucky star that I had once indulged in a rich man's fancy and that I was able to fly to your rescue. You didn't know, did you, that I own one of the most up-to-date planes and that I am considered one of the finest pilots in Europe?"

No. Esther didn't know that. One of the most up-to-date planes in Europe? She had a sudden vision of herself and Johnnie and Nowell all flying together in that wonderful plane back to England. She had forgotten for the moment that the plane belonged to Miguel Alvalho, and that it was he who was one of the finest pilots in Europe.

"But how did you manage . . . ?" she asked bewildered.

"How I managed to fly a foreign plane over the jealously guarded frontier of this land of Bumbledom and how I managed to land on forbidden territory?" He gave a harsh, sarcastic laugh. "Money, my dear, money!" he said with a shrug. "My God! how I thank my stars that I am a rich man."

"And we will all fly back to England soon?"

He waited a moment or two before he answered:

"To-morrow, if you will be reasonable."

"Johnnie and I and . . . ?"

"You and Johnnie and I," he countered with a smile.

She gave a gasp and held her breath. Almost she had blurted out Nowell's name. Her eagerness had been that of a child, unthinking, visualising only the happy prospect, with a child's disregard of every obstacle that stands in the way of its pleasure. Then, suddenly, she met his glance, and once more she experienced that terrible sense of foreboding, whilst his presence here seemed again to be the harbinger of some appalling calamity.

He drew a long sigh and concluded:

"Yes! we can fly back to England, all three of us, to-morrow . . . if you are reasonable."

"What must I do?" she queried, stupidly, childishly, although she knew exactly what he meant, and knew what the disaster was which his presence somehow had heralded—a disaster which, like a breath of evil, would demolish the flimsy structure of hope which her buoyant fancy had built up. He rose, threw away his cigarette and stamped on it with a kind of savage movement as if he were grinding something noxious under his heel. He now stood in the middle of the cell, facing her, with arms folded, his fingers playing a tattoo against his sleeves. His nerves were obviously on edge, and his temper strained to breaking-point.

"Of course you know," he said, forcing himself to speak quietly, "that your question is just childishness. You have been told the conditions under which you and your brother will be set free and given a passport, as well as every facility for leaving for England immediately. You have been told that, haven't you?"

"Yes!" the girl replied coolly, "I have."

"Well, then?" he demanded.

She frowned and looked up at him with a puzzled expression in her eyes.

"You are not suggesting, are you, Miguel," she asked him, "that either Johnnie or I should comply with those conditions?"

"I don't see why not," he replied slowly.

The look of puzzlement in her eyes turned to one of horror.

"Miguel!" she exclaimed.

He came back close to her and sat down once again on the truckle bed, putting one knee to the ground, so that he seemed to be kneeling at her feet. Instinctively she drew away from him a little, but he noticed this movement of repulsion and broke into his habitual harsh laugh.

"What I have said has horrified you, has it, my beautiful?" he remarked.

"You can't have meant it," she murmured.

"But I did. Now listen to me, my dear," he went on more gently; "there is such a thing in life as common sense. Here you are at this moment, calmly sacrificing the life of your own brother, whom you love very dearly, for the sake of a man whom I don't know if you have ever seen, but to whom you certainly do not owe either loyalty or affection . . . and a man, mind you," Sir Miguel concluded gravely, "who, while he lives, will continue to drag any number of innocent, misguided people into dying for his worthless cause."

Strange that Miguel should have said that. They were almost the very words which she herself had used in Patchenko's house when she began to fear that Johnnie's life was being weighed in the balance against that of the late Tsar. "His worthless cause"—that was what she herself had called it, and she had cried out so loudly in her agony of mind that her words had reached the ears of the fallen monarch and brought about the final tragedy. And now for Miguel to use the same words, to speak the same thought! Was it not strange and fateful? Was it destined to be the presage of yet another tragedy?

"Miguel," the girl murmured faintly, "the man you are speaking of is dead."

"Dead?" The word, only half-uttered, broke from Sir Miguel's lips.

The girl rose and turned away from him, hiding the tears which at recollection of that moving drama and all its scenes of mourning and sorrow had welled to her eyes. Miguel, on the other hand, had remained seated on the low trundle-bed, with one knee still resting on the ground. He passed his hand once or twice across his forehead, which in spite of the cold was damp with sweat. His dark, Oriental countenance reflected the many conflicting emotions which Esther's words had conjured up in his soul. A tense silence

followed. Neither of them ventured to speak, and for a time both remained motionless.

At last Miguel hazarded the question: "How do you know?"

She replied without turning to him: "I saw him . . . dead."

"Where?" he demanded.

"In the house of the friend who sheltered him."

"Where?" he reiterated peremptorily.

"I have just told you," she replied, and this time she did turn and face him: "in the house of his friend."

"At Ufelgrad?"

"No."

"Where, then?"

She came back to him, steadied herself by resting her hand on the back of the chair and said slowly:

"Johnnie and I have sworn to one another and to ourselves that we would never tell that to any living soul."

"But you will to me."

"No, Miguel, not even to you. You said just now that there was such a thing in life as common sense; let me remind you that there is also such a thing as honour."

"But, child," he argued hotly, "that is all nonsense! If that impostor is really dead—"

"He was not an impostor, Miguel," she interposed.

"All the more reason why you and Johnnie should forswear that futile oath of yours. The man is dead, you say—then he is less than nothing to you. Where did he die? Tell me that, and to-morrow we fly to England."

And as she remained obstinately silent, he rose and in a tone of exasperation, cried out:

"I'll see if I can knock some sense into your brother's head."

"It will be no use, Miguel," she countered. "Johnnie won't tell you more than I have done."

"But why? Why, in heaven's name, now that the

man is dead? What harm can there be in saying where he died?"

"Only this: that the loyal souls who cared for him would be the victims of these people's hatred. You know as well as I do," the girl went on steadily, "the fate that would be in store for them if these assassins here knew where to lay their hands on them. A whole village would probably be put to fire and sword. Miguel," she urged, "you hadn't thought of that."

"And are they more to you," he demanded harshly, "than your own brother, and I, your future husband?"

Hearing this, all that Esther could do was to stare at him in horror. What, in heaven's name, could she say? That the suggestion of such a horrible bargain should come from Miguel Alvalho, whom she had promised to marry, revolted her. And men often accused women of having no sense of honour! While she and Johnnie turned away from the Administrator's proposal as from something unclean, Miguel had weighed its possibilities, had looked upon it with the eyes of logic, and framed an argument which he apparently felt was unanswerable. And even now, when she could not keep the look of horror out of her eyes, he made an effort to curb his temper, to appear kind and indulgent as a father towards an obstinate child. He smiled and seized hold of her hand before she had time to withdraw it, and patted it gently, murmuring:

"You will think it over, I am sure."

She shook her head. He looked straight into her eyes with an indefinable expression in his dark, fleshy face; then he shrugged his shoulders, picked up his hat and said:

"We will see what Johnnie has to say."

And the next moment Esther found herself alone, with Miguel's sophistry ringing in her ears: his "Why, in heaven's name, now that the man is dead?" and "Are they more to you than your own brother?"

Oh, it was horrible, horrible! Where was right,

and where was wrong? Where was honour when a man like Miguel Alvalho—whom she had learned to respect, a man to whom she had plighted her troth, whom she would promise to honour and obey if she did keep her troth—when a man like that spoke calmly of such a revolting compromise? Her dear, brave Johnnie, game to the backbone—how he would scorn the mere suggestion of saving himself at the expense of all those loyal souls! Well! what God had ordained would surely come to pass. She and Johnnie had stood by one another in this hour of a great decision. They had held hands and mutely sworn to themselves and to one another that they would stand by the code of honour which Great and Greater Britain had inculcated into the soul of every one of her children: "Stand fast! Do what is right, and hang the consequences!"

NOWELL

CHAPTER XLI

THAT same afternoon Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff, Chief Police Administrator of the district, was in his office pacing up and down the room like a caged beast. His nerves were seemingly at a high tension, as testified by the innumerable cigarette-stumps which littered the floor all over the place. The Administrator had done a great deal of this restless pacing during the past half hour, and he had smoked continuously with a view to calming his nerves. Apparently he had not succeeded. After tiring himself out physically, he sank into a chair by the table, rested his elbows on the blotting-pad and his chin on his two clasped hands. His visitor watched him with a sardonic smile on his

face, while he smoked an expensive cigar. That sardonic smile raised the Administrator's irritability to the point of exasperation.

"You had no right," he snarled, "to go behind my back."

"And obtain the information which you, my friend, never would have got?" the other queried dryly.

"I say I would have got it if you hadn't interfered."

"Hm!" the other retorted. "You have been four years—haven't you, comrade?—looking for your ex-Tsar, and the only certain fact you have learned about him is that he is at last definitely dead. Need I remind you that even that one fact you have learned through me?"

"Bah!" the Administrator rapped out with a sneer. "You tell me that the man is dead, but you have no proof—you can't even tell me where he died."

"There, where he had his headquarters, obviously. As I remarked before, you have been four years trying to find out where that was."

"I have only been here a couple of months."

"And I twenty-four hours. You have had a good start of me."

The Administrator gave a contemptuous shrug.

"Where the fellow had his headquarters," he said, "was in one of the Federated States. Its autonomy, like that of the Ukraine and others, has been recognised by our Soviet Republic. You didn't know that, did you? At first the Government up in Moscow didn't take the trouble to interfere. It maintained all along that the man was an impostor and not worth powder and shot. I don't know what made the Chief Commissar of Police change his tune about that. Anyway he did, and I was sent out here with full powers. There was never any talk of interference by the Secret Service Department. I can do all that is wanted, and I still maintain that the ex-tyrant was shot with all his brood at Yekaterinburg, four years ago. This fellow you are talking about was an impostor; dead or alive he was

of no account. You will soon find that another of the same kind will be turning up presently and, if men like you keep on interfering with my administration and I don't have a free hand, we shall have the same trouble all over again."

"And you are afraid," the other gibed, "that you will get all the blame for the second coming of your extyrant's ghost. Is that it?"

"I am not afraid," the Administrator retorted with a growl, "because I'll see to it that you, Comrade 101, get all the blame for that."

"And you all the credit for unearthing the den of traitors who harboured their 'Little Father Tsar' and of handing the lot of them over to the justice of your high-minded country. What is it to be, Comrade Administrator? The whole district put to fire and sword; the male population sent to Siberia; the women and children massacred? The whole of the dirty work, in fact. That is what you are longing for now that you have been bamboozled by a couple of English busybodies. Isn't that so?"

"We've got to find them first," Samartzieff snapped out viciously.

"And you think that you are the man to do it," the other mocked. "Heavens above!" he went on lightly, "why do you suppose your precious Commissars sent for me at immense cost to their depleted treasury? Because, my friend, they know that I am the only man in Europe on whose skill and peace of mind they can always reckon to do their delicate work for them."

"Bah!" the other ejaculated, trying to swagger and not quite succeeding. "I am just as capable a man as you—,"

"No, you are not," the master spy countered: "you have not the skill, and your mind is anything but tranquil. You and your precious inspector—a fool, by the way—saw visions of promotion and what not, by bringing the resuscitated Tsar to justice. You

are now like an animal in a fury. Your disappointment has addled your brain. You will, after this, go about blundering, hitting out right and left, and letting the innocent pay for the guilty. The ex-Tsar is dead," he went on emphatically; "take my word for it. It was not his ghost that haunted the steppes for two years and rallied a crowd of adventurers to his banner. It was really and truly the man whom all of you—yes, you included, my friend and comrade—bowed and scraped to and spoke of as the Little Father Tsar. By some agency, which I suppose will always remain a mystery, he survived your firing squad. But now he is really and truly dead, and all that the Commissars will expect of me will be to discover where he spent the end of his life, and which were the villages and townships that gave him shelter during the past two years. And that," he concluded, "I can and will do. The Secret Service Departments of half Europe will tell you that URIOI has never yet failed in anything he has undertaken."

He rose as he said this and stood now before the Police Administrator looking down on him with a magnificent expression of conscious power and of arrogance. A splendid figure of a man—tall and commanding, perfectly turned out and admirably groomed, with manicured nails and immaculately fitting clothes that proclaimed the London tailor—he seemed to tower over the shaggy, uncouth Russian official and to belittle him in his own eyes. He had spoken lengthily, in harsh, emphatic tones, and Samartzieff had listened to him without daring to interrupt. A tense silence followed. The white-faced clock up on the wall ticked on in unbroken monotone. Twilight had already invaded the distant corners of the room. Outside in the courtyard an electric standard had been turned on; its feeble, yellowish light crept in through the grimy window. Samartzieff seemed to have shrunk within himself. His elbow rested on the table, and his left hand, pressed against his forehead,

shielded his eyes and hid his face from the sardonic scrutiny of the master spy.

The latter gave a short contemptuous laugh before he finally turned to go. The clock just then was striking six. The Administrator pulled himself together; a remnant of manly pride urged him not to accept lying down the domination of this foreigner. He brought his fist down with a crash upon the table, a favourite gesture of his, destined to cow subordinates or prisoners who dared to defy him. But in this case it had no effect. The spy had already his hand on the door handle. Samartzieff called out peremptorily.

"*toi!*"

"Well!" the man drawled with studied insolence, and looked at the Administrator over his shoulder. "What is it now?"

"You have got to tell me what you are going to do."

"Nothing that concerns you, comrade," the spy retorted curtly. He went out of the room and banged the door to behind him.

Samartzieff jumped to his feet, made a movement as if he would follow, thought better of it, and finally sank back upon his chair, muttering a curse.

A few minutes later—ten perhaps—the door behind the Administrator's table which gave on the big waiting-hall was opened noiselessly and the sleek head of the inspector was thrust through the aperture.

"May I come in?" he murmured.

"Yes, yes!" the other growled. "Come in, curse you! And turn on the light."

This the inspector did, but not before he had carefully closed the door behind him. There was only one light in the room. It hung from the centre of the ceiling just above the table. It had a green porcelain shade over it which was thick in dust, and the lamp itself was so coated with dirt that it left the room in semi-darkness, save for a bright circle immediately beneath it. The

inspector crept up closer to his chief. He had already noted that the latter was in a vile temper, and preferred to efface himself until he was spoken to. He didn't have to wait long. The Administrator asked him, none too amiably, why he had come.

Before he replied the inspector sat down in his usual place at the table, at right angles to his chief, and as the latter's box of cigarettes lay open he coolly helped himself to one and puffed away at it in silence for a few moments.

"For two reasons," he said presently. "First to tell you that I met *toi* just now in the road. He came out by the side gate."

"Speak to him?" the chief queried curtly.

"He spoke to me."

"What did he say?"

"Commanded me—commanded, if you please—to see to it that the female prisoner is taken back to the hotel to-night and kept there until further orders from him."

The Administrator swore a round and comprehensive oath. "The insolent upstart!" he muttered under his breath. "I'll teach him his place before I've done with him. Well!" he went on to his subordinate, "what else?"

"He said that you could amuse yourself by venting your spleen on the male prisoner. Something, he thought, might be got out of him by the aid of the knout."

A savage glitter shot through the eyes of the chief.

"He may be right," he remarked. "I had a taste of the knout once in the days of the tyrant's *régime*, so I know. We might," he mused, "get something out of the fellow that way. I didn't think of it before, as I didn't want to have trouble over these wretched English. But I do wonder why *toi* wants us to differentiate between the man and woman. She to go and be made comfortable in the hotel and he . . . Well, never mind. What else have you come to tell me, Ivan Grigorovitch?"

"A very funny thing, comrade," the inspector said, threw down the stump of his cigarette, leaned both elbows on the table and began slowly to relate his curious experience.

"After I had that short talk with ~~101~~ I turned round the corner of the house towards the main entrance, when suddenly I was accosted by a seedy-looking individual—a cripple; he had a wooden leg and had on the uniform of one of the old cavalry regiments, but no cap. He had a companion with him, a younger man whom I did not notice particularly, except that he looked very much out at elbows. I thought, of course, that the fellows were begging and I warned them that it was forbidden to solicit alms in the streets. The older man, however, said at once that he was not begging, that he was a War veteran of I forget what regiment, and that all he wanted was five minutes' private conversation with the Chief Administrator of Police. Naturally, I told him that that was nonsense, that you were far too busy to see any one privately, and that anyhow this was after hours; the office was closed, but that he could present himself to-morrow during the usual hours when I—not you—would be free to see him."

The Administrator nodded approval.

"That was quite right," he agreed. "And what did the man say to that?"

"He said that he must see you now at once. He had a communication for you of the utmost importance. It would mean, he said, your fortune and mine, but that to-morrow would be too late."

"They all say that, don't they?" the Administrator put in with a short laugh.

"And that's exactly what I told him, and I pushed past him up the steps to the main door."

"And he followed you?"

"Yes: he and his companion were hard on my heels while I came across the hall. I could hear his wooden leg stumping on the stone floor, not half a

dozen feet behind me. The hall was empty, and as you know there is hardly any light there once the offices are closed. I thought, of course, that I would find the sentry outside your door and that he would make short work of those two louts, but there was no sentry," the inspector added significantly.

"I know," the chief admitted. "I sent him away when 101 called. I didn't want any eavesdroppers."

"Well, as I say, there was no sentry, and I certainly didn't relish the idea of tackling those two fellows single-handed. The older one was tall and looked vigorous—a youngish man, not more than forty, I should say, and with a very ugly look in his eye. However, I was only a score of feet from your door, when the two of them overtook me and coolly stood in my way. Again I warned them that punishment in the cells would be their lot if they did not immediately get out of the place, when the older one suddenly made a dive with his hand inside his coat and produced . . . what do you think? . . . a pint bottle of Strelsky vodka."

The Administrator gave a jump.

"*Vodka!*" he exclaimed.

"Strelsky vodka," the other affirmed. "I knew the bottle and it had not been opened. The fellow brandished it in my face and said: 'A pint of the finest vodka ever distilled in Russia, comrade. It is yours if you take me to see the Administrator of Police.'"

"But—but—but . . ." the Administrator stammered in his excitement, "the sale of vodka is strictly prohibited. And . . . Why didn't you grab the bottle, comrade?"

He passed his tongue over his lips, his eyes were shining with covetousness.

"Wait a bit, comrade," the inspector urged: "I was for grabbing the bottle, but what do you think the man did?"

"What?"

"He was holding the bottle by the neck," the

inspector explained, "and his arm was hanging down his side. 'Either,' he said, 'you take me at once to the Chief Administrator of Police, or I drop this bottle on the stone floor.' And he would have done it, too," the inspector went on with a look of horror in his pale eyes at thought of the narrowly averted sacrilege. "A pint of the finest vodka," he sighed; "worth the weight of a man's head in gold!"

"Well," the chief put in impatiently, "what happened?"

"I left the man outside, and here I am."

"Bring him in," was the Administrator's curt command. "Alone, of course; not the other."

Apparently the owner of the precious bottle had got tired of waiting, for no sooner had the inspector risen, ready to go to the door, before it was thrown open and the crippled War veteran stumped into the office. The Administrator looked round and gave him a quick scrutinising look. The man certainly looked soldierly, and not seedy, by any means. There was the air about him of a trooper in a good regiment. His overcoat—bottle-green with red facings, though very much the worse for wear—was well brushed, and his one boot had recently been cleaned. The Administrator failed to detect the "very ugly look" in his eyes on which the inspector had passed a remark. His face was certainly scarred, his nose very red and his beard shaggy. His brown hair had been smoothly brushed over his forehead in a straight fringe right down to his eyebrows, and this gave him a curious though not unpleasant expression. The only things that were not quite clean about him were his hands.

The bottle of vodka was there all right: the Administrator did not fail to note with satisfaction that there was a tell-tale bulge beneath the military overcoat. The younger man, who appeared to be dressed in what he happened to have, stood close to his older companion,

looking as scared as a rabbit and striving in vain to escape the attention of that fearsome police official.

"Throw this other fellow out," the Administrator commanded, pointing to him. The soldier tried to protest, but his young companion, seeing that the inspector had made a movement to obey his chief's command, was out of the room in a few seconds. The inspector went to the door and looked out into the vast, dimly lighted hall.

"Bolted like a hare," he remarked with a laugh. "He's out of sight already."

The cripple, after that short attempt at a protest, said nothing more. When he met the Administrator's scrutinising glance he only gave a shrug.

"Open that door, Ivan Grigorovitch," the chief now said to his subordinate, and pointed to the door facing him, "and tell the men to be on the watch."

The inspector did as he was bid, and the cripple, watching him, gave another contemptuous shrug. The door which faced the bureau was the one through which UR 101 had passed out a quarter of an hour ago. It gave on the long corridor, which in its turn led to the courtyard and the municipal goal. The measured steps of two men on sentry-go resounded from the farther end of the corridor. At a call from the inspector the footsteps came rapidly nearer.

The Administrator, looking up, encountered the soldier's glance: it was mere guesswork as to what that glance expressed, for the light coming from the lamp immediately overhead cast a deep shadow over the man's eyes and his shaggy brown beard completely hid his mouth. At the same time there was no mistaking his impudent gesture—a grimy finger put up to a shiny red nose; after which he thrust one hand under his coat and produced the bottle of vodka which, with a triumphant chuckle, he then placed on the table in front of the Chief Administrator of Police.

The fellow's impudence was so staggering that for the space of two or three seconds the Administrator

was put out of countenance. The next moment, however, he recovered himself, banged on the table with his fist and said gruffly:

"Take the thing away! How dare you hawk prohibited goods about? You call yourself an old soldier? . . . I've half a mind——"

Apparently the Administrator's orders to take the thing away did not impress the cripple, for he broke in with a laugh, saying:

"Oh, no, comrade, you haven't half a mind, nor even a quarter. Just look at this: the finest you've ever tasted in all your life."

Once again he dived with his hand inside his coat, and this time he produced a tool—a fearsome-looking affair made up of knife and corkscrew—with which he proceeded quite coolly to break the seal and draw the cork of the precious bottle, while the Administrator looked on, fascinated.

When the cork was drawn the fellow, equally coolly, replaced the bottle on the table, picked up, one by one, the two tin mugs which stood on the bureau, sniffed them, shook them, sniffed them again, and finally filled them half full with some of "the finest vodka ever distilled in Russia." With consummate self-possession he took up one of the mugs, raised it and said:

"Your very good health, comrade."

A regular conflict between pride and covetousness could be seen raging behind the Administrator's lofty brow; he passed his hand several times through his hair and banged his fist down on the table. But the pungent scent of the heady liquor was so enticing, the temptation so strong, that official pride soon had to give way; and when the soldier, having drunk his fill, smacked his lips and put down his mug, the Administrator raised his and emptied its contents at one draught. These, after all, were days of social equality, and there was nothing derogatory in an Administrator of Police having a drink with a War veteran.

In the meanwhile the two men on sentry-go outside

in the corridor had come near, and the inspector's voice could be heard giving them instructions to remain on the watch outside the office door, hearing which the cripple said gruffly:

"Send those fellows out of earshot, comrade, for if you don't you'll never know what I have come here on purpose to tell you. And," he added, and sank his voice to a whisper, "there'll never be such a chance of promotion for you again as long as you live."

The word "promotion" acted like magic on the Administrator's ears. To all these smaller officials, forced to eke out a precarious existence on scanty pay in these out-of-the-way districts, perpetually under fear of removal, threatened with punishment for the slightest negligence, the hope of promotion was as the very breath of life, their constant thought by day, their dream by night. Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff was no exception to this rule. He had just experienced a bitter disappointment through the interference of the Secret Service Department in what was essentially his province. He had come near to conviction that in time he would get the better of these English prisoners' obstinacy. He saw himself already writing out a full report of the ex-tyrant's activities in his attempts to rally an army under his banner, of the position of his headquarters and of the composition and numbers of his adherents. He heard the summons from Moscow bidding him come and receive the reward of his efforts—promotion, money, the commendation of his superiors. And suddenly he was confronted with this master-spy UR 101, sent down specially from Moscow to lord it over him and to complete the edifice of those castles in the air of which he himself had laid the foundation-stone. And this very morning he had seen his fervent hopes of promotion scattered to the winds. Despair had trodden closely on his brightest prospects. Thunder-clouds had obscured his vision of a clear sky.

His mind then was as receptive as a sponge, ready

to imbibe every suggestion of a new hope. Promotion! The magic word rang as a clarion call in his ear.

"Come in, Ivan Grigorovitch!" he called loudly to his subordinate, "and shut that door. Let the men stay out there till I call them."

Furtive and noiseless as a cat, the inspector slid into the room and closed the door behind him. Here he remained standing, his pale eyes and thin pursed lips expressing the astonishment which he felt at the unexpected sight which greeted him. That miserable caitiff with his scarred face and tattered uniform was making himself quite at home. Drawing a chair closer to the bureau he sat down opposite the Chief Administrator of Police, carefully disposing his wooden leg as comfortably as he could. But this was not all. With amazing impudence he picked up the bottle of vodka and invited the Administrator to have another drink; and when the latter, by way of response, took up his mug, the fellow filled it more than a quarter full. Having done this he half turned to the bewildered inspector and gave him a knowing wink.

"Don't stay out in the cold, comrade," he said with easy familiarity; "have a drink with us."

Without waiting for a response, he filled the second mug and held it out to the inspector, who took it without hesitation and emptied it to the last dreg. The Administrator did likewise, and both the men smacked their lips, for the vodka was exceptionally good, and all the more delectable as neither of them had tasted any since its manufacture had been prohibited by the State. The cripple, on the other hand, didn't drink again. He was highly commended by the two officials for this abstention.

"Better not stink of vodka," the inspector said with a hearty laugh, "when you come nose to nose with one of our sergeants."

This good-fellowship business being comfortably settled, the Administrator, who felt quite a warm glow in his heart for this War veteran who had brought him

that delicious vodka and who talked so confidently of promotion, asked him benignly:

"Well, comrade, and what is it you want to say to me?"

The cripple readjusted the position of his wooden leg and passed his grimy hand across his mouth, and began confidently:

"You see, comrade, it's like this. You wonder who I am and I will tell you. I was a cavalry soldier in the army of the tyrant. I fought all through the War, and now I am just one of those unfortunate men who are employed by the Secret Service Department up in Moscow under the Commissar of Justice."

"Hm!" the Administrator put in, not quite so benignly, "a spy, are you?"

"Yes, you may call me that, if you like. In Moscow they call poor workers like me 'secret agents.' They are hard taskmasters, comrade," the man went on with a sigh, "worse than any tyrant ever was. But you may take it from me that in good time they will all have to stand up before a firing-squad . . . every one of them and . . ."

"Yes, yes!" Samartzieff broke in impatiently, "never mind about that. Get on with what you have to say."

"All right, all right, comrade! I am coming to it," the cripple made haste to rejoin. "What I wanted to say was that the Commissars demand a lot of work and give very little pay. I have often brought them information worth the weight of a man's head in gold: just like this bottle of Strelsky vodka . . ."

And he brought his fist with such a bang on the bureau that even the Administrator gave a jump, and the pale-faced inspector nearly fell off the rickety bench on which he had found a perch.

"You'd think," the cripple thundered, "that they would have given me something extra for my pains? Raised my wages? Not a bit of it! I am sick of them—sick, I tell you. . . . And what's more, I told them—that is, I told the Commissar for Justice——"

"No wonder," the Administrator gibed, "that the Commissar wouldn't listen to you: you talk too much, comrade."

The cripple put his finger to his nose and nodded sagely. "He would have liked to know, though, what I alone can tell him," he said with a grin, "about those English busybodies whom you have got here under lock and key."

"Oh?" Peter Pavlovitch ejaculated, doing his best not to let the man see how eager and excited he had suddenly become. "And what's that, comrade?"

"I could tell him what I have come here to tell you," the soldier asserted.

"And that is?"

"Where the female prisoner spent these last few days before she came here, and where the male prisoner got his photograph."

"No!" the Administrator cried, unable to master his excitement at this amazing statement. He jumped to his feet and started pacing up and down the room in the way he had when his nerves got the better of him.

The inspector, quivering like a terrified rabbit, gazed wide-eyed from his excited chief to this impudent knave who had come out with such a staggering assertion.

At last the Administrator sat down, rested his arms on the bureau, and looked the trooper straight in the eyes.

"Tell me," he commanded.

But the trooper only grinned.

"What'll you pay me for the information?" he asked blandly.

And the Administrator replied on the spur of the moment: "One half of what I get for it."

"Put that down in writing, comrade," the other rejoined coolly. "Stefan Andreivitch Kronine—that's my name. Put it down in writing that you will give me one half of whatever reward you get for information

where the Englishman Curryer got his photograph of the ex-tyrant."

The Administrator hesitated, torn between his desire to make the fellow speak and the fear of being hoodwinked by him. The latter, divining his thoughts, stretched out his one leg, thrust his hands in the pockets of his coat and said decisively:

"I won't say another word, comrade, unless you write. . . . And let the comrade inspector witness your signature," he added a moment later.

Samartzieff indulged in a few oaths. He called to the inspector, who came round to him and leaned over his shoulder.

"Let me write it out for you, comrade," he whispered in his chief's ear. "I know how to word the thing: I was a lawyer once."

He picked up a pen and a sheet of paper and rapidly scribbled a few lines. When he had finished he read through what he had written and muttered to himself: "Yes, that will do. . . . No harm in that. . . ." He passed pen and paper over to his chief and said:

"You can sign that, comrade. It does not bind you unless a reward is actually paid."

Samartzieff drew the paper to him and read it through. He took the pen and, with a hand that shook visibly, he appended his signature to the document. The inspector did likewise, and then handed the paper across to the trooper, who took it from him, read it through very deliberately, and finally folded it and stowed it in the pocket of his coat.

The Administrator, at the end of his patience, shouted:

"Now, then! get on with what you have to say and clear out, or I'll have you thrown out by my sergeant of police."

But the placidity of the cripple was not to be ruffled by any blustering.

"Easy, easy," he said calmly, "there's just a little something more."

"There's nothing more!" Samartzieff thundered.

"Come out with what you have to say, or get out of my sight."

Unperturbed, the trooper made as if he would rise: he adjusted his wooden leg and made a movement to lift himself off the chair.

"As you like," he retorted coolly.

The Administrator swore, and the inspector was hard put to it to keep his chief from flying out into a rage that might compromise the whole of this interesting transaction in which he was quite determined to have his full share.

"Out with it, then," the Administrator muttered.

The cripple settled himself down again.

"You see, comrade," he began, leaning confidentially over the bureau, "by coming to you over this affair I am taking a very great risk . . . a very great risk indeed," he insisted: "one that might land me in Siberia or before a firing squad. You don't deny that, do you, comrade?"

"No, I don't," the other growled.

"Now I want to make sure," the cripple resumed, "the moment I see that things are looking dangerous for me, that I can clear out of the country in double-quick time. You understand that, don't you, comrade?"

"Yes, yes! go on."

"I have a wife. I have a son. I don't want to leave them behind to be shot, perhaps, or hanged because of me. That's right, isn't it, comrade?"

"Yes, yes! for goodness sake get on with what you want."

"Give me one of those comprehensive travelling permits," the trooper rejoined, "which I know you have the power to give. Make it out to me—Stefan Andreivitch Kronine, travelling with his wife Bertha Ivanovna and his son Andrei. I might want to go south to Odessa, or west to Petrograd, or east to Siberia. I might go away this very night, or to-morrow. I am taking a great risk, Comrade Administrator. You must do this for me."

The Administrator felt that this was the crucial

moment. Was the man really in possession of information which would mean promotion, renown, a fortune to him? Was there a trap somewhere which, on the other hand, might bring disgrace or worse if he fell into it? He felt suddenly all hot and fuddled. His brain no longer seemed clear. His thinking powers were deserting him. There was such an immense lot at stake all dependent on the honesty of this miserable wretch. Honesty? But, of course, the man was not honest or he wouldn't be here at this moment. He was a liar, that was obvious, for he was not a spy in the employ of the Commissar of Justice . . . may have been at one time . . . but been dismissed either for incompetence or dishonesty.

Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff was wishing to God (in Whom he did not believe) that his brain was a little clearer. His temples throbbed, his forehead streamed with perspiration. The inspector, who was still standing behind him, whispered in his ear:

"No harm in giving the permits he wants. The sooner the muckworm clears out of the country the better for us. But don't give the permits till you are satisfied that the information is correct."

Samartzieff nodded approval. He opened the table drawer and took out a small packet of papers. From these papers he selected three, laid them out in front of him, took up a pen and affixed his signature to each.

"Tell me the names again," he demanded.

The cripple reiterated his name, that of his wife and son, and the Administrator wrote these down at his dictation. When this was done he carefully blotted the papers, stamped each one with an official seal, laid them one on the top of the other and placed his hand over the lot.

"Now then," he said, "these are ready. You shall have them the moment I am satisfied that you have spoken the truth."

During all this while the cripple had remained almost motionless, sitting there as grave as a judge, hands in

pockets, leg stretched out, eyes rolling and a look in them that suggested a recent drinking bout. In answer to the Administrator's challenge he seemed to pull himself together, and said:

"Send for the English prisoners. You will soon see that I speak nothing but the truth."

"Why the English prisoners?" Samartzieff demanded.

"Send for them," the cripple insisted bluntly, "and you will understand."

He spoke with that obstinacy peculiar to every toper. Like Samartzieff and in a lesser measure the inspector, he appeared distinctly fuddled. His speech had become thick, but with it all he clung mulishly to his point and repeated over and over again: "Send for the English prisoners and you will know the truth."

The Administrator would have argued the point. He was not going to take orders from this despicable knave. Not he. But at the very first word the latter broke in with his persistent: "If you want to know the truth, send for the English prisoners."

The Administrator hesitated. Should he—should he not be ruled by this rascal? The inspector was at his elbow urging him to consent.

"There can be no harm," he whispered, "in having them here."

And suddenly the cripple murmured something about "promotion." Samartzieff did not get his exact words, but whatever they were they acted as a goad. Promotion? By all the shades below he was not going to miss that.

"Send for the English prisoners, Ivan Grigorovitch," he commanded.

The inspector's voice could be heard down the length of the corridor transmitting his chief's commands:

"The English prisoners. . . . To be brought here at once! . . . By order of the Chief Administrator. . . . Look sharp!"

A few minutes later his lean figure reappeared in the doorway. The Administrator had not addressed another word to the cripple. In spite of his excitement he was feeling rather drowsy. The air in the narrow room had become oppressive and he had great difficulty in keeping his eyes open and his head erect. At sight of the inspector's foxy face he looked up, blear-eyed, and murmured haltingly:

"Come in, can't you? . . . Where are the prisoners?"

"They'll be here in a moment," the inspector replied: "I have sent for them."

"That's all right," the cripple put in jovially: "we'll soon settle our little business. One or two questions very much to the point and you shall know everything."

"Why can't you . . .?" the Administrator queried thickly. "Why can't we . . .?"

He broke off and, drawing his handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped his streaming forehead and his neck.

"Whew!" he ejaculated, and gave a prolonged whistle. "Who is the fool who made the fire up? It is as hot as hell here; and I have a devilish thirst on me."

"Have another drink, comrade," the trooper said genially, and proceeded to empty the last of the good liquor into the two tin mugs.

"And you, too, comrade inspector," he went on cheerily. "Let us all be merry. The night is young yet, and when we have settled with the prisoners we'll go and spend an hour or two at the Red Eagle."

The Red Eagle was a low-down cabaret on the outskirts of the town. The Administrator and his subordinate picked up their mugs. The trooper rose after a short struggle with his wooden leg, and facing the two officials he raised the empty bottle high above his head.

"Here's to success!" he called. "To fortune and promotion!"

He put the bottle to his lips and promptly put it down again.

"Bah!" he said with an oath, "the bottle is empty!" This made the others laugh.

"Bad luck!" said the Administrator.

"Bad luck!" echoed the inspector.

And both these worthy police officials emptied their mugs at one draught.

Just then heavy, measured steps were heard to approach and to halt presently outside the door.

The cripple stumped across the room and drew the door open. A couple of police sergeants were standing in the corridor, one on each side of the two prisoners.

"Here they are!" the trooper exclaimed lustily. "Come in! Come in, my friends! You are welcome. Come nearer, come nearer! The Chief Administrator wants to have a little conversation with you. Don't you, comrade? And you, comrade sergeant," he added, addressing the escort, "wait outside. The Administrator will call you when he wants you, won't you, comrade?"

With scant ceremony he banged the door to in the men's faces and coolly turned the key in the lock.

"There now!" he said, "like this we shall not be disturbed. We'll be nicely by ourselves, won't we, Comrade Administrator?"

He gave a hearty laugh.

"Aren't they priceless?" he murmured in English.

Esther and Johnnie felt as in a dream. There was no mistaking Nowell Ffoulkes under the thin disguise of a crippled soldier. Esther knew him at once; she knew him because all through these long hours of anxiety and loneliness she had kept up her courage by thinking of him. With Johnnie it was a different matter. He had no idea that Nowell Ffoulkes was in Russia. He had had no private talk with Esther. Beyond the fact that she was here—and thank God for that!—he knew nothing of her movements, where she had been or what she had done. His first reaction

when he caught sight of Nowell—unmistakably Nowell in spite of his fringe of hair and his shaggy beard—was one of bewilderment. Was he dreaming? he asked himself. He was very weak, he knew that. Two months of solitary confinement, with scanty food and no fresh air, had brought his vitality down to an uncomfortable level, and in spite of every effort to keep hold of himself this sudden bewilderment turned him giddy, and he was on the point of falling over backwards when a firm grip on his shoulder steadied him: Nowell's grip and Nowell's voice saying in English: "Easy, old man!"

The Administrator in the meanwhile had fallen half asleep. The potent drug introduced by Ffoulkes into the heady vodka was doing its work well. Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff was not only drunk, he was also under the influence of a powerful sleeping draught. He sprawled over his desk with his head buried in his outstretched arms. When the prisoners entered the room he raised his head wearily and cast a bleary glance, heavy with sleep, upon them:

"Now then," he murmured in a thick, halting voice, addressing the pseudo trooper, "let's get to business."

Ffoulkes at the moment was busy undoing the straps that fixed the wooden leg to his knee. He paid no attention to Samartzieff, but to the others he said in English:

"Take no notice of him. He'll be clean off in a minute or two."

The inspector, who had gone back to his perch on the rickety bench, was frankly snoring with his head dropping down over his breast. The Administrator made another effort to rouse himself, raised his hand with a view to rapping on the table as he was fond of doing, but the hand refused him service, seemingly, for it fell inert and soundless on the blotting-pad.

"What are you doing?" he stammered, rolling his eyes first in the direction of Ffoulkes and then in that of the inspector.

"I am taking off this quite unnecessary leg," Ffoulkes replied. "It hurts like blazes."

"Why . . . don't you . . . ask them . . . questions?" Samartzieff queried vaguely.

"You begin, comrade," Ffoulkes retorted. "I am busy." As a matter of fact he was busy, divesting himself of his military overcoat. Out of its ample pockets he extracted first a woollen scarf and then two lengths of rope. Esther and Johnnie, wide-eyed, their hearts beating furiously with excitement, watched him, fascinated. He now handed one of the lengths of rope to Johnnie.

"Don't do anything till I tell you," he said, sinking his voice to a whisper. "When I do, make for the blighter on the bench."

Just then it seemed, to these three people whose lives at this moment hung by a thread in the hands of Chance, that a slight noise came from the other side of the door, and there was an almost imperceptible movement of the latch. One of the men outside in the corridor had probably glued eye or ear to the keyhole. It was a crucial moment. Nothing but complete self-possession could help the situation. It became slightly more complicated when "the blighter on the bench," otherwise the inspector of police, took this opportunity to slide down with a clatter to the floor, and the Administrator, trying once more to raise his head, muttered:

"What are . . . you doing . . . Ivan . . . Grigo . . . Grigoro . . . vitch?"

But Ivan Grigorovitch was past giving an answer. He lay in a heap on the floor, breathing heavily and wearing on his lean face a peaceful, beatific smile.

"Now for it, Johnnie," Ffoulkes said hurriedly. "Truss the blighter as you would a fowl."

After which, falling back into Russian, he spoke at the top of his voice so that the men outside should hear:

"Good night, comrade, and thank you. You will look after the prisoners? Good. And I am to tell

your men outside that you will lock up the office and that they can go off duty now. Certainly I will, comrade. Anything you command. Yes! I'll find the night-watchman and tell him to bolt the main door. I'll go round the other way and speak to the men in the guardroom. Certainly, certainly, comrade. Anything you wish. Good night, comrade! Good night, comrade inspector. Good night."

While he talked glibly, at the top of his voice, Esther watched him. Lost in wonder she could hardly credit her ears or eyes. Was this really Nowell? Or was it some kind of spook that was haunting her dreams? Was she actually standing here looking on amazed while he busied himself with scarf and rope to render the Administrator entirely helpless? First the scarf to smother any cry that might find its way to the man's throat; then the rope pinioning his arms and securely fastening his legs. When he had done this to his satisfaction, Ffoulkes picked up the overcoat and put it on again. He raised the Administrator's hand, which still rested, inert, on the three precious permits: he picked up the permits and stowed them away in the pocket of his coat. And all the while he talked—talked at the top of his voice with plenty of "Yes, comrade's" and "Certainly I will, comrade. The men to go off duty. I quite understand," as cool, as self-possessed, as deliberate as if discovery, and with it death, were not waiting for him outside one of those doors.

Johnnie, taking his cue from Nowell, performed an equally successful trussing of the inspector of police. "Truss him as you would a fowl," Nowell had commanded, and after a minute examination of Johnnie's work he declared it to be very good. Neither of the men had offered any resistance, or scarcely any. Under the influence of a powerful narcotic, backed by potent liquor, they were more like two bundles of inanimate chattels than a pair of drunken men.

Now everything was ready. A last look round, a whispered "Come!" a final loud "Good night,

comrade," the turning out of the light, the opening of the door behind the helpless police official, then the passing out of furtive, soundless steps, and the three fugitives were in the waiting-hall, which appeared immensely vast and ghost-like in the gloom.

The office door had hardly closed behind them—and it had been closed almost soundlessly—when the one light in the great hall was suddenly switched off. The whole place was plunged in complete darkness, darkness that could almost be felt. Esther pluckily smothered a little cry of alarm, put out her hand and encountered Nowell's sleeve.

"Who did that?" she murmured under her breath. A pressure from his arm reassured her. After that he kept her hand tucked under his arm, and all three proceeded cautiously across the hall, Johnnie holding on to Nowell's greatcoat. A few yards further along a faint streak of light coming from outside revealed the nearness of the front door. It was closed but not bolted, just as it had been left by Ffoulkes and Dmitri when they passed through it an hour ago in the wake of the inspector of police.

A few more steps, the opening of the door and the three fugitives were out in the open square. There were a few people about, not many, and the small party coming unobtrusively out of the municipal building excited no attention. Nowell pointed across the square in the direction of the railway station:

"The good old Citroën is just on the other side," he whispered, indicating the permanent way.

Rain and sleet greeted them as soon as they emerged from the building, beating into their faces driven by a bitter north-easterly wind. A regular Russian autumnal evening it was: dark, wet and cold. Esther shivered under her thin dress. Nowell took off his military coat and put it round her. His tunic he took off also, and insisted that Johnnie should put it on to cover his shoulders. The boy, who was in a weak

state of health, was, perhaps, less able to bear the cold than his sister. He took no denial from either of them.

"I am quite warm," he said lightly, "and we have not far to go."

They crossed over to the station. It was closed, at any rate for the time being, as there was no train expected for a couple of hours at least. There were no lights inside and only one feeble lamp outside.

"We'll see if they will let us into the waiting-room," Nowell remarked.

"Are we going by train?" Esther queried under her breath.

"I hope not," Nowell replied dryly, "but I want to—"

He was brusquely interrupted by a sergeant of police who had just come out of one of the doors.

"The station is closed, comrade," the man said gruffly.

"There will be a train presently," Nowell returned, "won't there?"

"Not till the morning," the other replied.

"Could we wait inside?" Nowell rejoined. "My wife is feeling the cold, and my son has just recovered from a serious illness."

The police sergeant looked the three of them up and down. "Let's have a look at your passports," was the curt rejoinder.

"Certainly, comrade," Nowell said and fumbled in his pockets.

"And your travelling permits," the sergeant added, "if you are going by train."

"We are going by train, comrade sergeant," quoth Ffoulkes imperturbably, "and here are our permits."

He handed over to the sergeant the three permits delivered to him by the Chief Administrator of Police —comprehensive permits enabling the holder to travel by train all over the country in the company of his wife and his son. Such permits are only delivered

under very exceptional circumstances and only to certain persons of consequence. The police sergeant looked on these almost with awe. The signature of the Chief Administrator of Police and the official seals staggered him. He clicked his heels together, gave the military salute, and handed the papers back to Nowell.

"Will you come with me, comrade?" he said, and turned back to the station with the little party following close on his heels. He took a key from his greatcoat pocket and opened one of the doors. It afforded shelter under a glazed projection and gave on the booking office. The office was dark and deserted. The sergeant switched on the light:

"You can wait here, comrade," he said, gave again the military salute and departed, closing the door behind him.

Nowell put his finger up to his lips and shook his head. There was to be no talking. There was a bench up against a wall. Esther and Johnnie sat down; both were too shattered mentally and too anxious even to think. All they did was to fix their weary eyes on Nowell and watch his every movement. What was to happen to them now they didn't know. Perhaps they had come to the point when they ceased to care. They were both so tired! so very, very tired! Esther wondered, but only very vaguely, whether they really were going somewhere by train. Those awful Russian trains! Hours late, and hours and hours to cover a few miles. Hours and hours while those police officials recovered from their drugged sleep and telegraphs and telephones were set going to apprehend them all and bring them back to gaol. And Miguel? What was Miguel doing? What would be his reaction when he was told that she had gone, mysteriously disappeared, she and Johnnie?

What would he do? What machinery would he set in motion to overtake her and carry her back to England like a fugitive slave—he, the man of money, who seemed to accomplish the impossible by the power

of his millions? Esther closed her eyes. She felt faint and there was a singing in her ears. Was it the whirr of the plane's wings—of that wonderful plane which would whisk her back to England without Johnnie and without Nowell?

She watched Nowell. The first thing he did after the heavy footsteps of the police sergeant had ceased to resound on the cobblestones outside, was to switch off the light; the next was to open the door and step out into the open. He remained standing in the doorway. The sleet beat into his face and the wind whipped his hair over his brow. After a few moments Esther rose and came softly up to him. She touched his arm and he turned to her at once. Even in the dim light she could see that he looked troubled.

"Nowell," she whispered, "is anything wrong?"

He patted her hand to reassure her.

"No, darling," he said, "nothing, I hope. But he should be here by now."

"He?" she queried. "Who?"

"Dmitri."

"Dmitri? Are we waiting for him? Is he coming with us?"

"No, no!" he replied quickly: paused a moment, while his eyes searched the gloom around. "Sorry, darling," he then went on. "I should have told you at once, but I was so sure. . . ."

"Of what, Nowell?"

"Of finding the boy hanging about here. We had agreed to meet outside the station. He had an important errand to see to in the town. Something the Staroshka had ordered him to do. I can't think what has become of him."

"Oh!" Esther ejaculated, "I do hope there's nothing wrong."

"I don't think . . ." Nowell began and then broke off abruptly. A vague form could be seen moving in the gloom, the farther side of the square; but it was not the small slender form of young Dmitri. A few

seconds later it came within the range of light projected by the street lamp.

"Miguel!" Esther whispered hoarsely.

"And, by God . . . !" Nowell exclaimed under his breath.

Miguel Alvalho was moving in the direction of the municipal building. He walked with head bent against the lashes of the wind. His hands were shoved in the pockets of his greatcoat. Rain and sleet were almost blinding, but less than ten yards in the wake of Miguel a small, slender form had emerged out of the night. It moved stealthily in the same direction as the master-spy. There was no one else near.

Nowell, with a smothered cry, took hastily hold of Esther's two hands, thrust her back into the office and closed the door on her. Only just in time: the next moment he perceived the flash of a long steel blade as it caught a ray of light from the overhanging street lamp. Dmitri was now immediately behind Miguel. He had a large hunting-knife in his hand. Twice he raised it and brought it down again. Twice and then once more. Miguel fell on his face without uttering a cry.

Breasting the wind Nowell was already running to the scene of this appalling tragedy. Dmitri had turned over the inert body of his victim and was kneeling beside it, fumbling. Fumbling. Before Nowell could get anywhere near him he had jumped to his feet, made a dash for the darkest corner of the square: and the small, slender form was quickly lost in the gloom.

There was no question now of calling for aid, or rendering assistance, or of doing anything except run. Run. Nowell ran back to the station; Esther and Johnnie were standing just inside the door. Nowell seized Esther's hand and beckoned to Johnnie. They ran, all three of them, round the station, over the permanent way, across a long piece of derelict land. Darkness, sleet, a biting wind: they breasted them all.

and ran. Not one of them had thought of anything. There was just the blind instinct to run.

They came on the old Citroën parked behind a clump of weather-worn trees: larches, firs, silver birches. A well-chosen spot, for the whole of this derelict land looked forlorn. There was no one in sight. Some twenty yards beyond the clump of trees a fence divided the land from the road: its spiles, most of which were broken down, creaked and groaned and finally collapsed under the buffeting of the gale.

The fugitives reached the car, almost spent with this race for life against a head-wind and the blinding sleet. Nowell opened the door, and beckoned to Esther and Johnnie to get in. In order to guide them he had flashed his torch into the interior and his eye was caught by an object lying on the floor evidently hurriedly thrown in. He picked the thing up. It was a pocket-book. As soon as he opened it a paper fluttered out. By the light of the torch he turned it over. On it was written in pencil:

“I killed him. The Staroshka ordered it. He was a spy and was out to have us all destroyed. I’ve taken his money. It is blood-money. The Staroshka will deal with it. I am going back to him now. The papers in here may be useful to you. I didn’t look at them.”

Nowell thrust the paper into his pocket, and looking up encountered Esther’s anxious gaze. She was sitting in the far corner of the car. She had Johnnie’s head against her breast, and her arm round his shoulder. The boy, worn out by weeks of semi-starvation, was almost in a state of collapse.

“What is it, Nowell?” she asked in a hoarse whisper.
“Don’t ask me now,” he begged of her. “I’ll tell you later.”

He closed the door of the car and took his place in the driving-seat. By the light of the torch he turned

over the contents of Miguel Alvalho's pocket-book, searching for something, he hardly knew what, but something that would prove a help or a guidance in this awful emergency. At first there appeared to be only papers of various kinds: notes, time-tables, addresses, itineraries. No money. And it was only after he had examined, as he thought, every partition that he came on a secret flap which he had almost missed. In it there was tucked away a paper which, when he had read it through, caused him to utter a cry of triumph.

"Esther, my darling," he called to her over his shoulder, "no more worry. We are safe, I tell you. Safel!"

He put on the headlights and started the old car off, turning from the waste land through a gap in the fence into the road. This road, well known to all travellers in eastern Russia, runs alongside the railway line all the way from Uskenpol to Syzran, where it branches off in order to follow the left bank of the Volga as far as Kreminsk where the Soviet Government had recently established an important aerodrome and school of aeronautics.

And while the old Citroën sped on, shivering and shaking on the stony road, Nowell Ffoulkes kept repeating to himself the lines which were written on that one piece of paper that Miguel Alvalho had kept stowed away under a secret flap of his pocket-book. Above the signature of the Administrator of the Red Army Department of Aeronautics, and adorned by an official seal, the written words were few and to the point:

"To the Director-in-Charge of any aerodrome or school of aeronautics throughout Soviet Russia:

"The bearer of this note is entitled to the use of any Government aeroplane he may select and for as long a period of time as he desires, such aeroplane

to be placed at his absolute disposal on demand, together with pilot and/or mechanic if required."

Ffoulkes kept on repeating the magic words to himself over and over again. At one moment, unable to contain his excitement, he brought the car to a halt, and turning to Esther he said:

"Listen to this, my beloved."

Crouching in the corner of the car, with the weight of Johnnie's inert body against her breast, Esther had, for the past half-hour, been in a kind of trance: not quite asleep but not really awake. Nowell's words, spoken with a note of intense joyousness, brought her to full consciousness. He recited the magic words to her, twice and three times, before they penetrated into her brain, but when they did she had the feeling as if the darkness round her was suddenly dispersed by a mighty ray of light, so powerful and golden that it drove away all fear and calmed the turbulent elements outside. The night seemed no longer dark. There was neither rain nor sleet nor bitter wind. Everything around was beautiful and rosy as a summer's dawn.

"But, Nowell," she murmured, feeling ecstatically happy, "where did that . . . that wonderful thing come from?"

But all he did was to reiterate his entreaty:

"Do not ask me now, my beloved. I will tell you later."

NOWELL

CHAPTER XLII

LORD RALSTANE, with the telegram in his hand, marched up and down the room in a state of obvious, intense agitation. Mr. Harman, entering the room just then, declared afterwards that he had never seen his chief in such a condition of nervous excitement. Lord Ralstane did not even seem aware of Mr. Harman's presence in the room until the latter had said, and then reiterated:

"You sent for me, sir?" Even then his lordship gazed on his editor-in-chief in a vague, puzzled kind of way, as if wondering who the — this fellow was and what it was he wanted.

This, at any rate, was Mr. Harman's impression of his chief on that wonderful morning in early October when he was summoned into the inner sanctum at a most unusual hour.

"Oh! Ah! Harman, of course," the chief ejaculated after a moment or two, and with a hand that shook—such a remarkable thing, that shaking of the great man's hand—held out the telegram to the bewildered editor. "Read that, Harman," he went on, and his voice also shook, "read that. Read it aloud. I want to be sure that I am not dreaming."

Dreaming!! The chief dreaming!! It was incredible. Mr. Harman took the telegram and, in his own words, felt, when he read it, that he was not sure either whether he was awake or dreaming. The telegram had been sent from Teheran. It said:

"All safe. Esther Ffoulkes and I arrive London as soon as possible. CURRYER."

This interview between the editor of the *New Era* and his chief had occurred a month ago. Since then many things had happened, both in London and in far-flung Uskenpol. Here the death of UR 101, though tragic in the extreme, had caused no heart-burning to the Chief Administrator of Police, who was wakened that morning from a drugged sleep with the news that the body of a man, a stranger to these parts, had been found in the square opposite the railway station with three knife thrusts in the back, any one of which would have been fatal. The purpose of the crime was obviously robbery, for though the stranger's clothes suggested that the wearer was a wealthy man, no money or papers of any kind were found upon his person.

The body was discovered in the early morning when there was a train due in on the up-line and the station doors were about to be opened. It was thought at the time that the Administrator and the inspector would be at their private residence, and the sergeant of police who had made the tragic discovery went there first to make his report. But neither the wife of the Administrator nor the mother of the inspector had seen their respective husband and son since the previous afternoon; in fact, both the women were feeling anxious and had already sent round to the assistant inspector asking for news or advice. The latter was soon put in possession of the facts connected with the night's tragedy—the murder in the open square and the mysterious absence from home of the Chief Administrator and of his subordinate—and at once took charge. He questioned the sergeant of the detachment of military police who had been on night duty in the municipal building. Fearing a reprimand, the sergeant declared that he and the men who had escorted the English prisoners to the Administrator's office had shortly afterwards been discharged for the night. He declared that the order to go off duty had been given to him by the Administrator himself. As a matter of fact, it had been transmitted to him by a man whom

he never saw and whose voice only came to him through a closed door.

"The Comrade Administrator called to me," the sergeant explained, "and said that he would look after the prisoners himself and lock up the office for the night, and that I and the men could go off duty."

"You didn't see the Administrator again after that?" he was asked by the assistant inspector.

"No, comrade," the man replied.

"Nor the chief inspector?"

"No, comrade."

"Nor the prisoners?"

"No, comrade. The Chief Administrator had a visitor in his office," the sergeant resumed after a slight pause.

"A visitor?"

"A man who looked like an old soldier. He was a cripple and had a wooden leg."

"And was that visitor still in the office when you introduced the prisoners?"

"I think so, comrade, but I couldn't make sure," was the sergeant's reply. "I didn't catch sight of him."

When a quarter of an hour later the assistant inspector and four men of the military police entered the office of the Chief Administrator after repeated knocking, they were appalled at the sight which met their gaze. The Administrator was sprawling over the bureau in what looked like drunken sleep, his arms were pinioned behind his back and his legs were tied together with rope, while the inspector was lying on the floor close by in the self-same undignified condition. What in the world had happened? The assistant-inspector set the men to free the two officials, and to get them water and black coffee to try and restore them to consciousness. After a time they came to, but it took a long time before they were able to answer questions coherently.

The Chief Administrator, however, soon pulled

himself together. The first thing he did was to order the men out of the office, and then to hear from the assistant-inspector a detailed report of the tragic event of the night. The English prisoners had disappeared. They, of course, were the perpetrators of the mysterious crime, and a certain cripple, supposedly an old soldier who had been seen entering the municipal building just before closing time, was in some sort of way connected with the affair, in proof of which the assistant-inspector drew the Administrator's attention to a wooden stump, such as were used by indigent cripples, which was lying on the floor and had been evidently purposely discarded.

Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff took a long, long time, many days, in fact, to make up his mind what he would do in this very ticklish matter. He had identified the body of the murdered man as that of the master-spy sent by the Government to supersede him in the affair of the ex-tyrant and his followers, and it would have been the simplest thing in the world to wire to Moscow that UR 101 had been murdered in the open square of Uskenpol obviously for purposes of robbery and presumably by the English prisoners, who had unaccountably disappeared, together with a mysterious confederate whose identity it was impossible to determine.

Yes, all that might have been very simple, but for one fact: What would Samartzieff's own position be after that? What would be the reaction on the powers up in Moscow when they came in possession of the countless mistakes and blunders that brought about the final catastrophe? First and foremost the escape of the English prisoners: wasn't that enough to blight forever the career of the Chief Administrator of Police? And not only to blight his career but to lay him open to prosecution for the crime of negligence that threatened the safety of the State?

Peter Pavlovitch Samartzieff and his subordinate

spent three sleepless nights, and as many torturing days, trying to make up their minds how best to save their necks from the consequences of their carelessness. That fatal bottle of vodka reinforced by a potent drug had been the cause of it all. But how to explain that to those relentless guardians of the nation's common-weal? How to explain? . . .

The hours and days sped by and the Chief Administrator of Police and his subordinate did nothing at all, and gradually a sense of security penetrated into their souls. UR 101 was dead. Who cared? Who knew that he had been in Uskenpol at all? Who knew that he had presented his credentials to the Chief Administrator of Police? No one, apparently, save the people up in Moscow. And what did they know? They had supposedly sent their master-spy to Uskenpol to lord it over the officials there. But had they? Why should they have sent him to Uskenpol of all places in the world? And even if they had . . . well, spies came and went and disappeared. . . . Their very names fell into oblivion. They took their risks and no one cared, least of all the Government.

As for the English prisoners . . . well, let them be. They disappeared that night . . . but how? And whither did they go? A few very discreet investigations were set on foot but brought no results.

"Let them be," said the Chief Administrator to his subordinate.

"It will all be forgotten before the end of the month," the inspector asserted hopefully.

And apparently it all was forgotten. All: the escaped prisoners; the murdered spy; and also the man, ex-tyrant or impostor, who had thought for a time that he could overthrow the power of this stupendous democracy by the magic of his presence and the enthusiasm of a few hotheads.

NOWELL

CHAPTER XLIII

THAT was what happened in far-off Uskenpol, while an aeroplane, the property of the Russian Government, sped through the air from Kreminsk to Astrakhan, where Nikotis, skipper of the Greek vessel *Ambrosios*, had been waiting for more than six weeks under the orders of Lord Ralstane for information concerning one John Curryer, representative of an American motion-picture company. Then from Astrakhan to Enzeli by sea; from Enzeli to Teheran by road; while the police officials over in Uskenpol decided to "let them be."

It was cold and damp and foggy, but it was home, nevertheless.

Esther received Lord Ralstane in her boudoir where last she had been in the company of Sir Miguel Alvalho.

"Do you really mean that about Johnnie?" she asked him after her first warm greeting of this man who she knew would always be her friend.

"He is my son now," Lord Ralstane replied earnestly. "Didn't he tell you?"

"Of course he did," she responded. Her voice felt choky and there were tears in her eyes. "I could hardly believe my ears."

"It is quite simple, my dear," he rejoined. "And the very least I could do for him after the risks which I allowed him to run. And I loved Johnnie from the first. He was so like the boy whom I lost. From now onwards he is my son; he will be my right hand in my business while I hold the reins, and the head of it all when I am gone."

After that the name of Miguel Alvalho came to Esther's lips.

"Did you know that he was a spy in the pay of Russia?" she asked.

"Yes," Lord Ralstane replied, "and in the pay of other countries, too. Sir Nowell Ffoulkes told me; he had suspected it for some time. I wish he had told me sooner."

"You know that it was Nowell who saved Johnnie and me?"

"I didn't till Johnnie told me. A fine fellow, that."

"A chip of the old block," Esther put in with a smile. "You know that his great-grandfather was a follower of that legendary hero—the Scarlet Pimpernel."

She paused a moment and then added softly:

"We have loved one another for years. We hope to be married in the spring."

THE END

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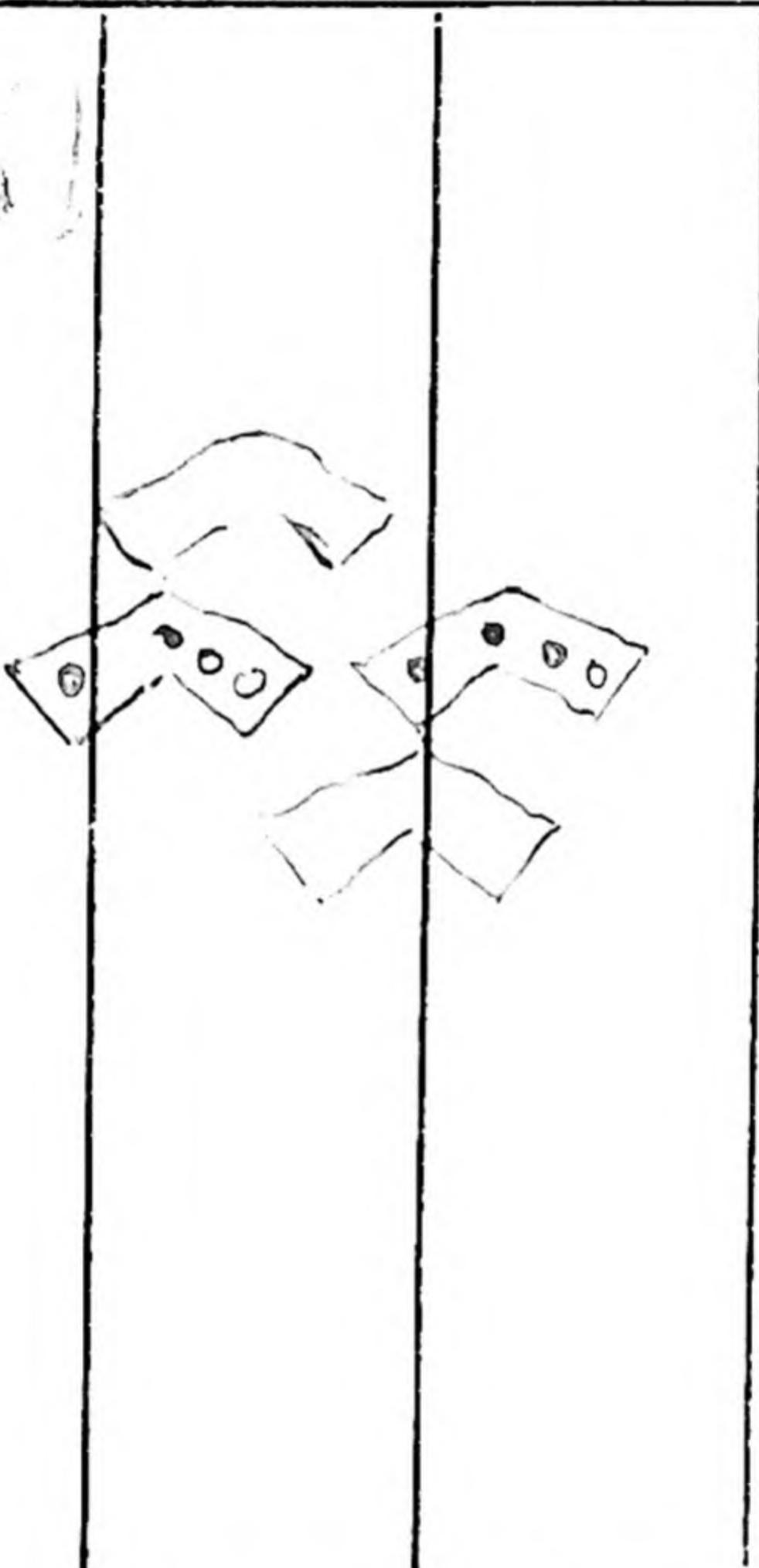
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